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BY EDWARD S. ELLIS,

AUTHOR OF THE FOLLOWING DIME NOVELS:

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NEW YORK:
BEADLE AND ADAMS, PUBLISHERS,
98 WILLIAM STREET.

PREFACE

The events recorded in the following pages are partly facts which came into the writer's possession about a year since. IMOGENE and IRENE MERMENT are the names given to two sisters, who were orphaned in the manner related by the trapper. One of these sisters is now living in California, and her painful experience has been referred to more than once in the papers of that State.

The historical facts relating to the Hon. Hudson Bay Company, and the Indians of the Northwest, are authentic and reliable; and although some of the events may strike the reader as unnatural, yet, but few of them are fiction, and the most improbable have had their existence in facts.

Entered according to Act of Congress, in the Year 1860, by
BEADLE AND COMPANY,

In the Clerk's Office of the District Court of the United States for the
Southern District of New York.

BILL BIDDON, TRAPPER.

CHAPTER I

OUT LATE AT NIGHT.

"How is it, Nat? Any light yet?"

"Not the least sign of one, and it's my opinion it will be a long time before we see another."

"What! you haven't given up all hopes of reaching the camp? I don't relish the idea of camping out to-night."

"Nor I; but I'm thinking that will come sooner or later."

"Well, there are several hours yet, in which we must plod onward," I added, trudging wearily behind my companion.

Before going further, I may as well introduce my friend and myself. My companion answered to the name of Nathan Todd, and was a native of Maine. He was a tall, lank individual, with attenuated limbs and an awkward appearance generally. He was meager but muscular, and when roused to the heat of passion, as quick and powerful as the panther. His gait was ungainly, and he seemingly was capable of any thing but speed; but on one or two occasions since leaving the States, he had shown a fleetness of foot truly wonderful. He was a good, open-hearted fellow, and one who, when driven to the wall, would be a dangerous enemy. Once or twice, however, he had shown the white feather, and his natural timidity would often evince itself. As a consequence, Nat was not, perhaps, the safest companion in the hour of danger; but, for all that, there was no one in our party whose presence I would have preferred upon the night in which I introduced him to notice. There was no imminent peril threatening, and Nat was a capital companion, who could while away the hours, if he chose, with his inexhaustible store of anecdote and humor. I knew he entertained a warm affection for me, and would brave almost any danger rather than be suspected of his only deficiency. A single intimation would decide his course in a moment.

Nat wore a singular dress—half savage and half civilized. The pants and shoes were such as are fashionable in the enlightened world; but a capacious hunting-shirt incased his body, secured around the waist by a heavy band, and much the same as are worn by the hunters and natives of the far West at the present day. The most striking part of his dress, however, was the hat. This he had brought with him from Maine,

and it really seemed indestructible. It was of a gray color, and having lost its band, had acquired the shape of a cone. When it rested on his head, the edge reached the shoulders behind, and the eyebrows in front, and the pointed peak rose far off above the crown.

Nathan Todd's face was full of shrewdness and good humor. He had a large, curved nose, broad mouth, and a fine blue eye. The chin was retreating; but this drawback was modified partly by a long tuft of yellow hair, the only signs of beard upon his face, except a shadowy mustache. The hair was long and sandy, and harmonized well with the rest of his countenance. There was ever a contraction of the eyebrows—a sort of unspoken question—so often seen in persons from “down east,” which indicate a prying, curious disposition.

As for myself, my name is William Belmond, and I hail from one of the middle States. Shortly after the announcement of the discovery of gold in California, I was seized with the lunacy that was carrying its thousands to the Pacific coast. I was well situated in life at home, but that was not considered. I must fish up a fabulous fortune also. At the age of twenty, then, without a settled purpose in life, I determined to make a journey to the El Dorado of the New World. I was not influenced solely by the love of gain, but the love of adventure urged me irresistibly on. I had heard wonderful stories of the boundless prairies, of their wandering hordes of Indians, their millions of buffaloes and horses, and the vast, billowy ocean of verdure and sunshine, and the Far West seemed the paradise of the world to me.

Provided with an ample outfit I proceeded by the usual route to Independence, Missouri, where I made inquiries of the trains constantly leaving that point for Oregon and California. I there stumbled upon Nat Todd, my present companion. He had just arrived from his distant home, where he had left a widowed mother and a disconsolate sweetheart. But he said he was going to return, in just two years from the day he left, with a “rousing heap” of money, and intended to buy “Squire Hunt's farm,” take Alminy down there, and live the rest of his life. His frankness and humor impressed me favorably; and after a short conversation, we grasped hands, and swore to remain by each other till our adventures were terminated by death or a happy *denouement*.

We engaged places in a train which left the next day. This company numbered nigh two hundred persons, and was composed of all kinds of characters, except females. There were French *voyageurs*, Irishmen, and an agent of one of the western fur companies. The majority of the rest were from the plow or workshop. They had secured the services of an experienced guide, and were well equipped for the journey before them.

The overland route, at this time, was so alive with passing emigrants, that few depredations were committed by the Indians. The savages sometimes hung around companies, but as there were always other whites in sight, they rarely ventured upon any greater crime than pilfering. Nothing worthy of note occurred upon the journey for a length of time. We experienced the usual mishaps and trials of emigrants, but nothing more startling. We sometimes lost a part of our baggage and provisions in crossing the rivers, and were greatly discomforted by the terrific storms which often rage in those regions. Then, again, we traveled mile after mile, and hour after hour, upon the dry, monotonous, glistening, rolling prairie, so wearied and tired of the scene that we hardly exchanged a syllable for hours at a stretch.

At last, the plains of Kansas were reached. On the day in which I introduce my friend and myself to notice, we had descried a solitary antelope at a great distance upon the prairie, and set out to bring it down. We left our horses behind, hoping to reach the animal by stratagem. I approached near enough to wound it, when it made off with the speed of the wind. Expecting to see it give out each moment, we followed mile after mile, until gathering darkness warned us that night was at hand, when we halted in alarm. The caravan was nowhere in sight, and, we doubted not, had disappeared hours before. We left the train about noon, and had been warned that they would not halt or wait for us, and should we lose them, they would take no pains to hunt us up. But we heeded not this, as we expected to keep them constantly in view, and have the antelope cooked for our supper.

I have shown how widely we were mistaken. We were compelled to see the night shut down around us, without bringing us any hope of spending it with our friends; and at a late hour we were still plodding over the prairie.

"No light yet, Nat?" I asked, for the twentieth time.

"Well, I should think you had asked that question about often enough, to be suited with my answer."

"I expect to ask it a dozen times more."

"Then I'll just answer it once for all, so I won't be troubled ag'in with talking. No! there's the answer."

"I don't know but what you are right, Nat. We must have come a long distance, utterly unconscious of it, in our eagerness to get that antelope, and it's useless to hope to reach the camp again before morning."

"That's my opinion, exactly. That camp, I opine, is a good dozen miles off yet."

"Then we may have a chance of reaching it still before morning, as this bright moon favors us."

The moon full and clear, had arisen an hour before, and its light illuminated the prairie for a great distance. Far away, on

every hand, we could discern the blue outline of the horizon while the prairie seemed to roll up against it like the dark boundaries of a mighty ocean. Every thing was as silent and motionless as though we were treading a region of death.

"I wonder whether those fellows will go a foot out of the way to pick us up," muttered Nat, half to himself.

"I don't believe they will. They told us they wouldn't, and they value their time too highly to waste it for a couple who are of no account to them, especially since we can fall in with other trains."

"I reckon they're of some account to us, being they have got our horses and our traveling apparatus."

"That is true, Nat. In fact, since we have been walking here, I have persuaded myself that those fellows would, just as likely as not, turn out of the way to get rid of us."

"Somehow or other, I've thought just the same for a week."

"Then, if we value our property, we mustn't let them slip."

"No; I'll be shot, if we must!" exclaimed Nat, half angrily, striking at once into a more rapid walk. "If they run off with my mare, I'll—I'll—" and again he strode faster over the prairie.

Long—long, we journeyed in silence. Nat's apprehension had been aroused, and he was willing to walk the whole night to come up with those in whose honesty he had so little faith. Now and then he would mutter incoherently to himself and shoot ahead, keeping me almost on a run to maintain my place beside him. Suddenly he halted, and turned upon me with an expression I shall never forget. I could see his eyes expanded to twice the usual size, and his whole face aglow beneath his monstrous hat, as he asked in a cold whisper:

"Do you s'pose there are any Injins roving round the country to-night?"

"I am sure I can not tell, but I think it extremely probable. Are you fearful that there are some upon our trail?"

"There might be! I was thinking if we should come across any of them, they might be able to tell us whether any of them chaps think we're lost, and have run off with my mare."

"Should we meet a lot of those savages, no doubt they would tell us something else besides that."

"I expect so," and he wheeled around and strode ahead again. It was now getting near midnight, and I was completely worn out. It was out of the question to reach the camp that night, and we might as well submit to our fate at once, so I spoke rather decidedly.

"I'm tired of this."

Nat turned and looked at me a second, and then answered:

"So am I. We've to camp out, and there's no use in waiting till morning. Ain't it lucky you brought your blanket with you? It would go hard to do without that to-night."

"I brought it with me by the merest chance, not thinking I

should need it. It was indeed fortunate; and now let us prepare to use it."

There was not much choice on the hard but warm earth. My blanket was ample and sufficient for both. After some search, a small depression was selected, and in this I spread my heavy blanket. We then stretched ourselves upon it, pulled the ends over us, being sure to inclose our rifles in its folds, and resigned ourselves to sleep.

Ere the sun was fairly above the horizon, we were up and upon our way. Knowing the company would not be in motion for several hours, we hoped to reach them before they breakfasted, and have a laugh over our adventure. Nat led the way, and took long, rapid strides over the ground, seemingly oblivious of my existence. I kept beside him, now and then venturing a remark, but receiving no intimation that I was heard.

Suddenly, my friend came to a dead halt, dropping the butt of his rifle to the earth with a ringing clasp, and wheeled upon me with one of those indescribable looks. I knew something unusual was agitating him.

"What's the trouble now?"

"It's no use; we'll never see that company ag'in."

"What makes you speak thus?"

"I know so. I had a dream last night that my mare was gone forever and ever, and I know she is. Don't you remember that fur agent told us they'd change the direction they's traveling some time yesterday? They hadn't done it when we left them, and they done it as soon as we got out of sight I warrant."

I now remembered hearing our guide remark, as also did the fur agent with us, that the trail made an abrupt bend several miles ahead. We were traveling north-east at that time, and the contemplated change was nearly due south-west. This fact had entirely escaped our minds, until it now occurred to Nat, and we had consequently been proceeding in a wrong direction. By referring to the sun, we found we had gone far too much to the east in order to intercept the train, which was now in all probability many leagues to the south-west.

This was a discovery which was overwhelming. We had then been journeying in a direction which had brought us not a foot nearer the company than if we had remained motionless, and it was certain that the party was irrecoverably lost.

"This is a pleasant discovery, Nat?"

"Very."

"I see no hope for your mare. She is probably a good day's journey distant, and we do not know what direction to take to reach her."

"That's it," replied Nat, ill-humoredly; "if I knowed sure what way to tramp, I wouldn't stop till I'd laid my hands on her for a certainty; but this trudging along, and just as like as not going away from her all the time, isn't the thing."

"I see no course left, then, but to proceed south, in hope of falling in with some emigrant train, or in striking the Oregon trail, north, and getting into California ahead of them."

"The Oregon trail then. If these fellows find they've got the start of us, they won't give us a chance to come up again, and we might as well try to catch a whirlwind as to follow them. No, we must try the Oregon trail, and get into California first. How far is the trail off?"

"It can't be more than a day's journey; the trail follows the Platte through Nebraska, and I'm pretty sure we can reach it by nightfall, if we proceed pretty steadily and rapidly."

The day was clear and pleasant, and the sky devoid of the least signs of threatening storm. There were two or three white clouds straggling off in the western horizon, but the sky was of a deep clear blue. We now proceeded, in a northward course, intending to strike the Platte at the nearest point. South, east, and west the small, waving hills of the prairie stretched, unrelieved by the slightest object, except in the west the far-off outline of some mountain-peak was just visible, resembling a slight pointed cloud against the blue sky. This disappeared at noon, and we were again like wanderers upon the illimitable sea. A short time after, Nat's keen vision detected a number of black, moving specks to the westward.

"An emigrant train, perhaps," I suggested.

"They're Pawnee Injins as sure as the world, and we'd better give them a wide berth."

"Pawnee Indians! How do you know that? You never have been in this section before?"

"That's true, but you don't s'pose I started out here without first larning something 'bout the country and folks, do you? If you do, you're mistaken. Just let me know in what part of the country we are, and I'll let you know what sights you will see, that is, if we are going to see any. Let's keep to the east; I don't want them Pawnees in sight."

"The Pawnee Indians are reported friendly to the whites."

"Exactly; but have they been reported *honest*? If they should come upon us and take a fancy to our rifles, what is there to prevent them from taking them? And," added Nat, with a shrewd shake of the head, "I've not faith enough in their good intentions to want 'em in sight at this time."

Not unwillingly I turned my face more to the north-east, and soon saw them disappear from view.

Some time toward the middle of the afternoon we descried a solitary buffalo ahead. After considerable difficulty we approached nigh enough to bring him down. He was quite poor, and his flesh was strong and tough; but we were glad enough to get it, such as it was. He was thrown on his face, with his knees bent under him, a keen knife run along the spine with just sufficient force to penetrate the skin, which was then pulled

down each side. This done, we cut the choice portions out. Nat reserved the buffalo-skin for his blanket, and the rest was thrown away.

Just at dark we reached a stream of considerable size, which I afterward learned was the Republican Fork of Nebraska. The point at which we struck it was about where it leaves the territory of Kansas and enters Nebraska. Although no considerable stream, we concluded not to cross it before morning, and made arrangements for passing the night upon its banks. A quantity of drift-wood lay scattered along its shores. As the river was quite low, we gathered several animals, and had a supper started. The slain buffalo gave us a good supply.

Seated around our fire, half-hidden in the river bottom, with the dark, gliding stream flowing silently by, and smoking our pipes, we naturally fell into an easy conversation.

"We can't be far from the 'trail,' can we?" asked Nat.

"Farther than I suspected," I answered. "The Republican Fork, which I am convinced is the stream out there, is over fifty miles from the Platte."

"Fifty! I don't believe I can head off those fellows after all, and my old mare and overcoat will go to them for."

"They will go *somewhere* where you will never see them again."

"I know I'm bound to lose 'em, and I shan't think any more about them."

"That's the best plan, Nat. They are no great loss."

"I still like to know whether that greaser or fur agent took them, though," interrupted my friend, earnestly.

After this he fell into a fit of musing, and we remained silent for some time. When the fire burned low, I arose and replenished it. Nat looked earnestly at the roasting blaze, carrying ashes and cinders high in the air.

"Wonder if some Indians won't see that?"

"I guess not. We are so low down the bank that I think it can be visible for no considerable distance upon the plain, and the bend in the river fortunately saves us from view up or down stream. The only point from which it would attract attention is directly across from us."

"And it looks suspicious enough there," repeated Nat, in a whisper, removing his pipe and gazing across the river.

I did indeed look toward it. Our fire was nearly on a level with the water, which roiled darkly and lazily at our very feet; and when the crackling blaze arose higher than usual, the low land of the opposite shore was struck by the light. At such times I could not help reflecting what fearful chances were attached to our camp when it be lurking opposite. I involuntarily started from the fire, and felt relieved when the shore disappeared with the darkness.

It began to grow quite late, the fire had smoldered low, when Nat removing his cap, turned upon me with:

"What do you think of our journey to California?"

I was at a loss to comprehend his meaning, and looked at him for an explanation.

"I mean to ask whether you feel in such a hurry to get to the mines as you did when we were in Independence?"

Now, to confess the truth, the experience of the last week or two, and especially of the last two days, had done much toward dampening the ardor which I once thought could never leave me; and I believe, had I possessed moral courage enough I should have seized the first opportunity to return to a home where I possessed enough to satisfy any sensible person's ambition. Still I hesitated to commit myself.

"I can not say that I am; but what induced you to—"

"I'm sick of this business," interrupted Nat, lengthening his legs with a spiteful jerk, and looking disgustingly into the fire.

"What has come over you?" I asked, amused at his manner.

"Well, there's that mare—"

"But you promise I not to think of her."

"How can I help it, I should like to know? She's gone sure, and there's that overcoat, that cost me four dollars and a half in Lubec; and Alminy made a big pocket in it on purpose for me to fill full of gold chunks; and I should like to know how I am going to do it, when a greaser has got it."

"I am afraid that that would not be the only difficulty you would be likely to experience, Nat, in getting it filled."

"And my jack-knife was in the coat pocket, I declare!" exclaimed he, suddenly starting up and pinching alternately one pocket and then another. "Yes, sir, that's gone, too; that's worse than all the rest," he wailed, despairingly, falling upon his elbow, and gazing abstractedly into the fire.

"That's a trifling loss, surely, as you have your hunting knife."

"I've a good notion to get up and go back now," he wailed, not heeding my remark. "I'm sick of this business. It's bad enough to lose the mare, but when the knife is gone I can't stand it."

I knew this was but a momentary despondency with my friend, and for the sake of whiling away the time before sleep, I was inclined to humor it.

"But what will you do for that gold that you was going to buy Deacon Hunt's farm with for your Alminy?"

"Let her go without it," he answered, gruffly, without removing his gaze from the fire. "She can get along without it. I believe she only coaxed me to go off to California to get me out of the way, so that mean old Hawkins might take my place. If he does come any stronger, he'll catch it when I get back."

I laughed deeply, but silently, as I witnessed his appearance, at these remarks. It was so earnest and feeling that it was impossible to resist its ludicrousness.

"Nat," said I, after a moment's thought, in which my mind had taken an altogether different channel, "I am free to own that I have little faith in our success in California. I propose that we seek our fortune elsewhere. The fact that gold exists in California is now known all over the world, and we know there is not the remotest corner of her territory which is not swarming with hundreds who leave no means untried to amass their fortunes."

"But where else can we go?"

"If gold exists in one spot on the Pacific coast, it is right to suppose it exists in many others."

"Have you thought of any place?"

"It seems to me that in Oregon, among the spurs of the Rocky Mountains, there must be precious metal."

"But why hasn't it been found?"

"Oregon is thinly settled and no suspicion has led them to search for it."

"Well, let us dream upon it."

A few more fagots were heaped upon the fire, and then we lay down for the night's rest.

My companion had lain but a minute, when he suddenly sprung to his feet, and exclaimed:

"Hurrah for Oregon!"

"Be careful," I admonished; "your indiscretion may be fatal. That wall of darkness across the river looks gloomy and threatening enough to me."

"It does—hoho! I'm shot—no, I ain't neither."

That instant the report of a rifle burst from the other bank, and a bullet whizzed within an inch of my companion's face.

"Heavens! are we attacked?" I ejaculated, starting back from the fire.

"I believe so," replied Nat, cowering behind me.

We listened steadily and fearfully, but heard no more. The fire sank down to embers, the river grew darker, and the night, moonless and cold, stared upon us. But no sleep visited my eyelids that night. Till the gray dawn of morning I listened, but heard no more.

CHAPTER II.

A NEW FRIEND.

As the light of morning overspread the prairie I felt an unspeakable sense of relief. Not a moment of sleep had visited me that night, although Nat's extreme weariness toward midnight gave way to his drowsiness, and he slept long and heavily.

"Come, wake up Nat!" said I, shaking him as soon as I saw that day was at hand.

"How? What's the matter?" said he, rubbing his eyes, and gaping confusedly about him.

"Day is at hand, and we must be on our way to Oregon."

He hastily rose, and we commenced our simple preparations. I ran up the river bank, and I swept the prairie to the south of us to satisfy myself that no wandering Indians were in sight. The whole plain was visible, and with a feeling akin to joy, I reported the fact to Nat. He, however, was not satisfied with my survey, as he had more than once before detected objects that had escaped my vision, and he ascended a high rock in the back, some distance up, and took a long, careful, scrutinizing sweep of the whole horizon. Feeling satisfied that he would be no more rewarded for his pains than I was, I started the fire, and commenced cooking some of our buffalo. I had been engaged in this for a minute or so, when I heard Nat call, in a hoarse, anxious half-whisper:

"Come here, quick!"

I hurried to his side to ascertain the cause of his agitation.

"Why, just look yonder, if that ain't enough to agitate one, then I don't know what is."

He pointed across the river, out upon the prairie; and following the direction of his finger, I saw, not more than a mile or two away, a single horseman proceeding leisurely from us.

"Who can that be?" I asked, half to myself, still watching the receding figure.

"Why he's the one that sent that bullet across the water after us, and I'm thinking it's lucky for him he's going another way. If I should get my hands on him, he would remember the time."

And Nat extended his arms energetically, and shook his head emphatically by way of emphasizing his remark.

I continued gazing after the unknown person. At first I supposed it was an Indian, but at that distance, and with his back toward me, it was almost impossible to judge accurately. A moment's look, it convinced me that it was a white man. I could make out the hunting cap of the trapper, and was satisfied he belonged to that class. His horse was a white-brown or roan, and he seemed totally unaware of the proximity of strangers.

But who could he be? Was it he who had fired the well-known fatal shot? And what meant his actions in thus voluntarily coming to us? These and similar questions I asked myself without taking any rest from them. When his figure had grown to be but a speck in the distance, I turned to Nat.

"We may see him again; but, if I don't know him, I know of nothing. I'm wonderfully hungry just now."

We partook of a hearty breakfast, and then, without much delay, started for the Republican Fork.

Here we made a careful search of the shore, and ascertained enough to settle beyond a doubt the identity of the horseman with the would-be assassin. His footprints could be seen, and the place where he had slept upon the ground, together with scraps of meat. By examining the tracks of his horse, we discovered that both hind feet were shod; this decided our question of his being a white man; and although it cleared up one doubt, left us in a greater one. He could not have avoided the knowledge that we were of the same blood, and what demerited wish could lead him to seek the life of two harmless wanderers? Be he who he might, it was with no very Christian feelings toward him that we took the trail of his horse, and pursued it.

Our course, after the first five miles, swerved considerably to the north-west. From the actions of the stranger, it was evident he understood the character of the country, and we judged the shortest way of reaching the Oregon trail would be by following him. The footprints of his animal were distinctly marked, and we had no difficulty in keeping them.

At noon we forded a stream, and shortly after another, both considerably less than the Republican Fork. On the northern bank of the latter, were the still glowing coals of the stranger's camp fire, and we judged he could be at no great distance. No signs of Indians were seen, and we anticipated little trouble from them, as they were friendly at this time, and the most they would do would be to rob us of some of our trinkets or rifles.

At sundown we left our guiding trail and struck off toward a small stream to camp for the night. When we reached it, and decided upon the spot, Nat remarked, seriously:

"I say, Richmond, that feller might be near enough to give us another shot afore morning, and I'm going to see whether his trail crosses the brook or not."

So saying, he wheeled and ran back to the spot where we had left it. It was still light enough to follow him, and bending his head down so as to keep it in view, he continued upon a rapid run. I was upon the point of warning him against thus running into danger, but not feeling much apprehension for his safety, I turned my back toward him. A minute after I heard his footsteps again, and, looking up, saw him coming with full speed toward me, his eyes dilated to their utmost extent, and with every appearance of terror.

"He's there!" he exclaimed.

"Where?" I asked, catching his excitement.

"Just across the stream up there; I liked to have run right into him afore I knowed it. See there?"

As Nat spoke, I saw the glimmering of a fire through the trees, and heard the whinny of a horse.

"Didn't he see you?"

"Yes, I know he did. When I splashed into the water like a fool, he looked up at me; I seen him pick up his rifle, and then I put, expecting each moment to feel a ball in me."

"I thought you intended laying hands on him if an opportunity offered," I remarked, with a laugh.

"I declare, I forgot that," he replied, somewhat crestfallen.

After some farther conversation, I decided to make the acquaintance of the person who had occupied so much of our thoughts. Nat opposed this, and urged me to get farther from him, but a meaning hint changed his views at once, and he readily acquiesced. Leaving him, I started up the stream.

When I reached the point opposite the stranger's camp fire, I coughed so as to attract his attention. I saw him hurriedly scan me, but he gave no farther evidence of anxiety, and I unhesitatingly sprung across the stream, and made my way toward him. Before I halted, I saw that he was a trapper. He was reclining upon the ground, before a small fire, and smoking a short black pipe.

"Good evening, my friend," I said, cheerfully, approaching within a few feet of him. He raised his eyes a moment, and then suffered them lazily to fall again, and continue their vacant stare into the fire. "Quite a pleasant evening," I continued, seating myself near him.

"Umph!" he grunted, removing his pipe, and rising to the upright position. He looked at me a second with a pair of glittering eyes, and then asked: "Chaw, stranger?"

"I sometimes use the weed but not in that form," I replied, handing a piece to him. He wrenched off a huge mouthful with a vigorous twist of his head, and returned it with not a word. This done, he sunk back to his former position.

"Excuse me, friend," said I, moving rather impatiently, and determined to force a conversation upon him, "but I hope you will permit a few questions?"

"Go ahead, stranger," he answered, grudgingly.

"Are you traveling alone in this section?"

"I reckon I ar', 'cept the hoss which ar' a team."

"Follow trapping and hunting, I presume?"

"What's yer handle, stranger?" he suddenly asked, as he came to the upright position, looking at me with interest.

"William Belmont, from New Jersey."

"Whar's that place?"

"It is one of the Middle States, quite a distance from here."

"What might you be doin' in these parts?"

"I and my friend out yonder are on our way to Oregon."

"Umph! you're pretty green 'uns."

"Now I suppose you will have no objection to giving me your name."

"My handle's Bill Biddon, and I'm on my way to trapping winds up country."

"How far distant?"

"A heap; somewhar' up 'bove the Yallerstone."

"Do you generally go upon these journeys alone?"

"Sometimes I does, and sometimes I doesn't."

I ceased my questions for a few moments for fear of provoking him. As his route, as far as it extended, would be in our direction, I determined to keep his company if I could gain his consent. He was a splendid specimen of the physical man. He was rather short, but heavy and thick-set, with a compactness of frame that showed a terrible strength slumbering in his muscles. His face was broad, covered by a thin, straggling beard of grizzled gray, and several ridged scars were visible in different parts of it. His brows were beetling and lowering, and beneath them a couple of black eyes fairly snapt at times with electric fire. His mouth was broad, and though one could plainly see a whirlwind of terrific passion might be called into life within his breast, yet there was, also, in his face, the index of a heart alive to good-humor and frankness. I saw that, if approached skillfully, his heart could be reached. He was evidently the creature of odd whims and fancies, feeling as well satisfied without the society of his fellow-man as with it—one of those strange beings, a hero of a hundred perils, who was satisfied to lose his life in the mighty wilderness of the Far West, without a single one suspecting or caring for his fate.

"Would you have any objection to my friend and myself accompanying you, that is, as far as you should proceed in our direction?"

He looked steadily at me a moment, and answered: "You kin go with me ef you wants; but I knows as how you're green, and yer acc'n't s'pose I'm goin' to hold in fur yer. Yers as never does that thing."

"Oh, I shouldn't expect you to. Of course, we will make it a point not to interfere in the least with your plans and movements."

"Whar' is yer other chap? S'pose it war' ~~him~~ what come peakin' through yer a while ago; had a notion of spilin' his picter for his impudence."

"I will go bring him," I answered, rising and moving off. But as I stepped across the stream, I discerned the top of Nat's white hat, just above a small box-elder; and moving on, saw his eye fixed with an eager stare upon the trapper.

"Don't he look savage?" he whispered, as I came to him.

"Not very. Are you afraid of him?"

"No; but I wonder whether he—whether he knows any thing about the mare and my knife."

"Perhaps so; come and see. He just now asked for you."

"Asked for me?" repeated Nat, stopping back. "What does he want of me?"

"Nothing in particular. I just mentioned your name

and he asked where you were. Come, I hope you ain't afraid?"

"Afraid! I should like to see the man I'm afraid of!" exclaimed my companion in an almost inaudible whisper, as he tremblingly followed me across the brook and to the spot where Bidon, the trapper, was lying.

"My friend, Nathan Todd, Bidon."

"How are you? Very happy to make your acquaintance," said Nat nervously extended his hand.

"How're yer?" grunted Bidon, with a slight jerk of his head, and not noticing the proffered hand.

"Been a most exceedingly beautiful day," ventured Nat, quickly and nervously.

I saw the trapper was not particularly impressed with him, and I took up the conversation. I made several unimportant inquiries, and learned in the course of them, that our friend, Bill Bidon, was about forty years of age, and had followed trapping and hunting for over twenty years. He was a native of Missouri, and Westport was the depot for his peltries. For the last two or three years he had made all his excursions alone. He was quite a famous trapper, and the fur company which he patronized gave him a fine outfit and paid him well for his skins. He possessed a magnificently-mounted rifle, and his horse, he informed me, had few superiors among the fleetest mustangs of the South. Both of these were presented him by the company mentioned.

"Why ain't you got horses?" he asked, looking toward me.

"They were both stolen from us."

"I don't s'pose you've seen any thing of a company with a mare, short-tailed, that limped a little, and an overcoat that had a knife in the pocket?" asked Nat, eagerly.

"Not that I knows on," answered Bidon, with a twinkle of humor.

I gave the particulars of our loss, and then asked, without due thought:

"Did you not camp upon the banks of the Republican Fork last night?"

"Yas; what'd yer want to know fur?"

"Oh, nothing, nothing," quickly answered Nat.

I believed the trapper understood my allusion, and I hoped he would give an explanation of his act; but he made no reference to it, and, after further conversation, we all lay down in slumber.

CHAPTER III.

THE TRAPPER'S STORY

I WAS aroused from my slumber, before it was yet light, by Bidson shaking me and calling in my ear:

"Come, you claps, you've got only two minutes to swallow yer feed in."

Nat was already moving about, and I sprung to my feet, determined to continue in my friend's good graces, if such a thing were possible, by a cheerful acquiescence in all his reasonable wishes. Our fire was kindled, a hasty breakfast swallowed, and just as the sun made its appearance above the prairie, we moved off toward the north.

Long before noon we reached the Platte, and forded it at the point where Fort Grattan now stands. The Platte, during the winter months, is a boisterous stream of great width, but in summer it is very shallow (from which circumstance it derives its name), and at the dry season it almost ceases running, and dwindleth down to an innumerable number of stagnant pools. As it was now the summer season, we walked over without more than wetting our shoes. The Oregon trail follows the northern shore of this stream to Washington Territory, or to what was Oregon at the time of which I write. Leaving the Platte, we shaped our course toward the north-west, so as to strike the southern spur of the Black Hills. From Bidson's conversation, I found that his destination was the neighborhood of the head-waters of the Tongue or Powder River, which have their canons in the Black Hills.

As he allowed his horse to proceed upon a moderate walk, we had no trouble in keeping him company. We generally started at the first indication of morning, halting now and then to slake our thirst in the numerous streams which crossed our path, and resting an hour at noon. At sunset we struck camp upon some small stream, cooked our evening meal, spent an hour or two in smoking and conversation, and turned in for the night.

One night we halted upon the bank of a large stream some miles north of the Platte, which emptied into the Missouri. It was a deep and rapid, and near the center of the channel a small, sandy island was visible. We passed over this while fording the stream, and I noticed that Bidson walked around it, and surveyed several spots with more than common interest. I did not question him then, but at night when we were stretched before the fire, with our soothing pipes, I ventured the inquiry.

"I see'd sights on that chunk of mud one time," said he, with a dark frown.

"What was it?—what was it?" asked Nat, eagerly.

"Here's as what don't like to think of that time, augh!" he answered, seeming still unwilling to refer to it.

"Why not?" I asked, partaking of Nat's curiosity.

"It makes a feller's blood bile; but howsomever," he added, brightening up, "if you wants to hear it, yer kin."

"We do, by all means; please give it."

"Yas, that ar' war' a time of general wipin' out, and this yer water that now looks as black as a wolf's mouth, run red that night! It war' nigh onto ten year ago that it happened. I was down in Westport one day in summer when a feller stopped me on the shoulder and axed me ef I wanted a job. I told him I didn't care much, but if he's a mind to fork over, and it ain't desprit hard, and too much like work, I's his man. He said as how thar' war' a lot of fellers camped out on the prairie, as war' gwine to start for Oregon, and as wanted a guide; and heerin' me spoken on as suthing extronnery, why he like to know ef I wouldn't go; he'd make the pay all right. I cut around the stump awhile and at last 'cluded to go. I went out onto the prairie, and see'd the company. They were men, women, and children, 'specially the last ones. I see'd they wanted good watchin', and I kinder hinted they'd th' trouble afore they'd reached Oregon.

"There weren't many folks trampin' these parts then, and them as did go, had to make up thar' minds to see fig it and ha'r rasin'. Bears and beavers, they did! The reds wa' th' same then all over, arter you get clear of the States, and no feller's ha'r war' his own till he'd lost it.

"We started the next day, and struck the Platte afore night. There war' but twenty good men, an' I made half of 'em stand watch that night jist to git their hands in. In coorse they didn't see nothin' 'cept one straddlin' chap, like this feller yer that is called Nat. He said as how he see'd wonders, he did, and thar' war' a hundred reds crawlin' round the camp all night.

"We went purty slow, as it weren't best to hurry the teams; but we hadn't been two days on the way afore the fells got in to the all-firedest scrabble I ever see'd. I don't know what it 'bout, but it war' so big, they split company, and part of 'em crossed over and camped on t'other side the Platte. I told 'em they'd see stars purty soon, if they didn't splice again, but they's too rearin' to do it, and I said if they's a mind to be sich fools, they mought be far all me, and I'd let 'em go on alone. Howsomever, the smallest party leavin' on tar me not to leave 'em, and I 'cluded to stay with 'em as I knowed purty well they'd need me all the time.

"The biggest company as had crossed the Platte, kept on by it, and so the others said they'd leave it and cut across for

Oregon. I tole em' this war' the best way, and so we left 'em. Them I war' with war' a heap the smallest, and had but three or four men and five or six women and children. What made things look wuss I see'd 'signs' when we parted, and I knowed party well the reds smelt what war' goin' on. And 'bout a dozen times in the afternoon I could see 'em off on the peratie, stealin' 'long and dodgin' through cover. I knowed that the Injins were tollerin' us, seein' the other war' a heap more powerful nor us.

" Things got so dubersome afore night, I said to the men ef they'd take the advice of a feller as knowed what he war' 'bout, they'd turn round and never stop till they cotched the others; for ef they didn't, they'd catch it at night; reds war' 'bout them as thick as flies. They said how ef I's *friend* I mought go back, but as for them *they'd* go through fire and blazes 'fore they would. I felt riled 'nough at this to leave 'em, and I would ef it hadn't been for them poor women; they looked so sorrowful I made up my mind to stick to 'em fur thar' sake.

" We reached the stream just as it war' growin' dark, and the reds had got so sissy, that five or six of 'em stood a little ways off, and watched us. This scart the women and men, and they axed me what war' to be done? The women cried and wanted to coax the Injins up to give 'em sunkthin, to get thar' good will, but they war' cross and sulky, and didn't say much.

" After some talk and a heap of cryin', we 'cluded to camp on that piece of sand in the river. The teams war' drew over and we forked. The water war' some deeper nor now, and it took us a long time to land; but we got over at last. As soon as we war' clean over, I commenced fixing up things for the reds. We didn't build no fire, but put the teams together near the middle, and the women inside 'em. There was four men without me, and I set 'em round the place to watch fur sign. I made 'em all squat flat down on the mud close to the water, and told 'em to blaze away at any thing they see'd, ef it war' a beaver or otter, and gave 'em pertickler orders not to wink both eyes at a time. I see'd they's skeerish, and there weren't no danger of thar' snoozin' on watch.

" It's pretty sartin the reds would come some of thar' tricks, and come down the river; so I went up to the upper part of the drag, and laid in the mud myself to watch fur 'em. I knowed, too, they wouldn't be 'bout 'fore party late, so I took a secret nap as I laid in the mud. When I woke up the moon war' up in the sky and the river had riz so my pegs war' in the water. I flapped out, but didn't see nothin' yet. I sneaked down to my fother tellers, and found 'em all wide awake; and they said, too, as how they hadn't seen nothin' 'cept the river war' gettin' higher, which they kinder thought the Injins mought've done. Just as I war' going back I heard some of the purtiest singin' in the world. Fust, I thought it war' an Injin,

ef it hadn't been so nice; then I 'claded it must be an angel. I listened, and found it came from the wagons. I crept up and see'd two little girls all 'lone clus by the wagons, a singin' sunkthin'. Shoot me! ef it didn't make me feel watery to see them. The moon war' shinin' down through the flyin' clouds, right out on 'em. They sat with their arms round each other and war' bare-headed, and ef I hadn't knowed 'em I'd swore they were angels sure. I axed what they war' singin' for, and they said the Injins war' goin' to come after 'em that night, and they war' singin' to their mother in heaven to keep 'em away. Shoot me! when one of 'em throwed her little white arms round my neck and kissed my ugly meat-trap, I couldn't stand it. I went up to my place ag'in and laid down in the mud.

'It was gettin' colder, and the wind comin' up, drew the white clouds 'fore the moon, makin' it all black. But when it come out ag'in I see'd sunkthin' comin' down the river that looked like a log. I dug down deeper in the mud, and I set my peepers on it, for I knowed thar' war' sunkthin' else thar', too. It come right on and struck the mud a little ways from me. I didn't stir 'cept to kinder loose my knife. The log staid a minute, and then swung round and went down the river. I knowed the boys would see it, and I didn't leave my place. This is as low this war' only sent down to see what we'd do, I war' lookin' for other things, when I heard a noise in the water, and, shoot me, ef a sneakin' red didn't come up out of the water, and commence crawlin' toward whar' the girls war' singin'. (Just put a little fodder on the fire.)"

I sprang up and threw on some fodder, and I then seated myself and anxiously awaited the rest of his story. He put away his pipe, filled his mouth with tobacco, and, after several annoying delays, resumed:

"Thar' weren't no time to lose. I crept long behind him, mighty sly, and afore he knowed it, come down speed onto him. I didn't make no noise nor he either. I just grabbed his gun and finished him with my knife. I then crawled back ag'in, and, shoot me, ef I didn't see forty legs comin' down on us, the river war' full of 'em.

"I jumped up and hollered to the other fellers to look out. They came up aside me and stood ready, but it weren't no use. 'Fore we knowed it I see'd over forty of 'em 'long 'side us. We blazed into 'em and went to usin' our knives, but I knowed it wouldn't do. They set up a yell and picked for the wagons, while 'bout a dozen went at us. The first thing I knowed the whole four boys were down and thar' bein' no more, and the women screechin' murder. It made me despart, and I reckoned I done some tall work that night. Most these bein' types was on my trail come from that scrimmage. I see'd a red devil by me with that little gal as was singin', and coched a dead red's gun and let drive at him; but the gun weren't loaded, and so the devil run off with her.

"The oxes war' bellerin', the horses snortin', and the tomahawks steppin' the women's screams; the red-skins war' howlin' and yellin' like all mad, and as I had got some big cuts and knocks, I judged it best to move quarters. So I made a jump for the stream, took a long dive, and swum for the shore. I come up 'bout whar' you're setting, and I made a leap of 'racks 'fore daylight come."

"And did you never hear any thing of the children?"

"I never see'd 'em ag'in; but I come 'cross a chap at Fort Laramie when I went down ag'in, what said he'd seen a gal among some of the red-skins up in these parts, and I've thought 'faps it mought be one of 'em, and ag'in it moughtn't."

"Did you say that all happened out there?" asked Nat, jerking his thumb toward the island mentioned.

"I reckon I did."

"But there's a lot of Injins there now!" exclaimed he.

"As like as not," returned Bidson, with a sly look at me.

"I'm goin' to sleep then," and rolling himself up in his buffalo blanket, all but his feet disappeared from view.

"It's 'bout time to snooze, I think," remarked the trapper, in a lower tone, turning toward me.

"I think so, but I suppose there need be no apprehension of molestation from Indians, need there?"

Bidson looked at me a moment; then one side of his mouth extended into a broad grin, and he quietly remarked:

"Times are different from what they used to war'."

"Bidson," said I, after a moment's silence, "before we saw you we camped upon one side of a stream while you were upon the other. Now, I do not suppose you would wilfully harm a stranger; but since I have met you, I have a great desire to know why you fired that shot at Nat."

A quiet smile illumined the trapper's swarthy visage; and, after waiting a moment he answered:

"The way on it war' this: I see'd you and Nat camping here, and I spected you war' gwine to tramp these parts. I watcht you awhile, and I was gwine to sing out for you to come over. Then said I, 'Bidson, you dog, ain't there a chance to give 'em a powerful scare?' First I drawed head on you, but when that Nat jumped up, I let fly at him, and he fell backwards, he did. If we mought, it's time to snooze, and I'm in for it."

With this we wrapped our blankets around us, and in a few minutes were asleep.

On a clear summer morn'g, we sallied out upon the broad, open prairie again. The trapper now struck in a direction nearly due north-west, toward the Black Hills. The face of the country began to change materially. Vast groves of timber met the eye, and the soil became rich and productive. At noon we encountered the most immense drove of buffaloes that I ever

witnessed. They were to the west of us, and proceeding in a southern direction, cropping the grass clean as they went. Far away, as far as the vision could reach, nothing but a sea of black moving bodies could be distinguished. The whole western horizon, from the extreme north-west to the south-west, was occupied solely by them, and nothing else met the eye. They were not under way, and yet the whole mass was moving slowly toward. The head buffaloes would seize a mouthful of grass, and then move on a few feet and grasp another. Those behind did the same, and the whole number were proceeding in this manner. This constant change of position gave an appearance as viewed from my standing point, similar to the long leaving of the sea after a violent storm. It was truly a magnificent spectacle.

We approached within a short distance. They were scattered upon the outside, and with a little trouble the trapper managed to insinuate himself among them. His object was to drop a cow which had a couple of half-grown calves by her side, but they took the alarm, and rushed off into the drove. We then prepared to bring down one apiece. I selected an enormous bull, and sighted for his head. I approached high enough to make my aim sure, and fired. The animal raised his head, his mouth full of grass, and, glaring at me a moment, gave a snort of alarm and plunged headlong into the drove. At the same instant I heard Nat's rifle beside me, and a moment after that of the trapper. This gave the alarm. These three uttered a series of snorts, and, dropping their bushy heads, bowed off at a terrific rate. The motion was rapidly communicated to the others, and, in a few seconds, the whole eastern side was rolling simultaneously onward, like the violent converging of the sea. The air was filled with such a vast cloud of dust that the sun's light was darkened, and, for a time, it seemed as if we should suffocate. We remained in our places for over an hour, when the last of these prairie monsters had retired by. A strong wind carried the dust off to the west, and we were at last in clear air again.

I looked away in the direction of the herd, expecting to see my buffalo's lifeless form, and was considerably disappointed at my disappointment, as was also Nat at his. The trapper's prize was a dozen yards from where it had been struck.

"Pears to me," said he with a sly smile, "I hear'n your dog bark, but I don't see nothin' of no bull-dog, eger!"

"I hit mine," I answered quickly; "I am sure of it."

"Whereabouts?"

"In the head, plump and square."

"Whar'd you sight yoorn, Greeny?"

"Just back of the horns, and I hit him too. If he hadn't dropped before this, he'd have the head gone by a week."

"B'ars and beavers, you! Them buffaloes ain't mind you."

shots more nor a couple of hailstones. Do you see what I picked mine?" asked the trapper, pulling the buffalo's fore-leg forward, and disclosing the track of the bullet behind it.

"Isn't a shot in the head fatal?" I asked in astonishment.

"You might hit 'em thar' with a cannon ball, and they'd git up and run a'gin, and ef you'd pepper 'em all day what you did youn, you'd pick the bullets out thar' ter, and they wouldn't mind it."

This I afterward found to be true. No shot, however well aimed, can reach the seat of life in the buffalo through the head unless it enter the eye, fair front.

The trapper's buffalo was thrown forward upon his feet, his legs bent beneath him, and dressed after the usual fashion. He was in good condition, and we had a rich feast upon his carcass.

The trapper selected a few choice portions from the inside, relished only by himself, and, cutting several large pieces for future use, the rest was left for the wolves.

We proceeded but a few miles farther, and encamped upon the banks of the Dry Fork, a small stream, a few miles south of the Black Hills. There was but a foot or two of sluggish water, and in the hot season it was often perfectly dry. Here for the first time I was made aware of the changeable character of the climate in this latitude. The weather thus far, had been remarkably fine, and at noon we found the air sometimes oppressively warm. Toward night the wind veered around to the north-west, and grew colder. At nightfall, when we kindled our fire, the air was so cutting that Nat and I were in a shiver. Had it not been for our blankets we should have suffered considerably, though Bidlon did not call his into requisition. A number of cottonwood trees were at hand, which served partly to screen us from the blast.

After our evening meal, Bidlon remarked:

"The fire must go out, boys."

"Why? Do you apprehend danger?" I asked.

"Don't know as I do; I hean't see'd signs, but we're gittin' into parts summat skeerish."

"I suppose it's about time for the Indians to come?" remarked Nat, interrogatively.

"They're 'bout these parts. Me'n Jack Javin once got into a scrimmage yor with 'em, when we didn't 'spect it, and I jist 'cause we let our fire burn while we snoozed. I'd seen sign though, then, and I wanted to put it out, but he wan't afeard."

"Let's have ours out then," exclaimed Nat, excitedly, springing up and scattering the brands around.

"Needn't mind 'bout that; it'll go out soon enough."

As Nat resumed himself, Bidlon continued:

"You see, Jarvey, them reds kin smelt a white man's fire a good way off, and on sich a night as this, ef they're 'bout they'll

be bound to give him a call. "You needn't be afraid now, never, to snooze, 'cause they won't be 'bout."

It was too cold to enjoy our pipes, and we all layzed up for the night's rest. Soon I heard the trapper's heavy breathing, and shortly after Nat joined him in slumber. But it was impossible to sleep. The ground I was so cold that my blanket could not protect me, and the cutting wind was terrible. I used every means that I could devise, but it was no use, and I feared I should be compelled to either build the fire again or to continue walking all night to prevent freezing.

I chose the latter expedient. It was quite dark, yet I noticed our situation well enough, I judged, not to mistake. So grasping my blanket in my hand, I started on a rapid run directly over the prairie. I continued a long distance, and feeling well exhausted. I turned to retrace my steps. My blood was warming with the exercise, and I hurried forward, seeking upon sound sleep for the remainder of the night.

I continued my run for a full half-hour, and then stopped in amazement, as I saw no signs of my companions. Thinking I must have passed the spot where they were lying, I carefully walked back again, but without discovering the men. I had lost them in the darkness, and it was useless to hunt them at night. So I concluded to wait till morning, feeling sure that they would be at no great distance. I now commenced searching for a suitable place for rest, and at last hit upon a small depression in the prairie, where a large stone was half-buried in the earth on one side, which served to protect me from the chilling wind. As I nestled down beside this, such a feeling of warmth and comfort came over me that I forgot that I lay upon what had seemed a misfortune.

Lying thus, just on the verge of sleep, my nerves peculiarly alive to the slightest sound, I suddenly felt a trembling of the ground. At first it seemed a dream; but, as I became fully awake, I started in terror and listened. I raised my head, but heard no sound, and still in the most perplexing wonder sank down again, hoping it would shortly cease. But there was a steady, regular increase, and presently I distinguished vibrations of faint tremblings, like the distant mutterings of thunder.

Gradually these grew plainer and more distinct, and finally I could distinguish sounds like the tread of innumerable feet upon the prairie. Every second the jar of the earth became more perceptible. And finally the truth flashed upon me—a *herd of buffaloes was approaching.*

Terror for an instant held me dumb. My first resolve was to rush forth and warn Nat and Bill; but I reflected that they must have been awakened ere this, and that I could do nothing to ward off the peril which threatened all alike. Springing to my feet, I paused a second to collect my tumultuous thoughts. Could I reach the timber, I could ascend a tree and be beyond

danger : but I knew not what direction to take, and there **was** no time to spare. To remain was to be trampled to death : to run away could save me but a few moments longer.

God of heaven ! what a death !

Longer and longer grew the thundering tread of the animals and I stood like a marble man, the cold sweat pouring off me, tormented by a thousand agonizing thoughts, and expecting death every moment ! Nearer and nearer came the rattle of the clamping hoofs, and I stood rooted to the spot !

Sinking on my knees, I implored mercy of the One who could give it in this moment of dire necessity ; and while on my knees the means of preservation presented itself.

" **Save me !**" I exclaimed, breathing deeply, " that I did not think of it before."

I have said that I was in a sort of depression or hollow in the earth, and that a large stone was imbedded on one side. Now a safe and more secure shelter could not have been found in this emergency. Wrapping my blanket around me, I crept as far beneath it as I could, and was saved !

A few minutes later a dark body plunged headlong over me with the rapidity of lightning, followed instantly by another and another, and I knew the herd were thundering past. For a long time I lay there, beneath those thousands of feet, one of which would have been sufficient to kill me. The incessant creaking of their hoofs, and rattling of their horns, sounded like the discharge of musketry. Once a ponderous body tumbled over the rock which sheltered me, and I caught sight of a dark, writhing, bellowing mass, and the next instant it regained its feet and disappeared.

It must have been an hour that I lay here, ere the last animal leaped over me. Then I looked up and saw the stars shining overhead. My joy at the sight of those glittering orbs can not be expressed. I arose to my feet, and looked about me. It was too dark to discern objects, yet I could hear the rapidly retreating footfalls of the herd in the distance. Sinking to the earth I offered a sincere prayer of gratitude to the Almighty for his miraculous preservation of my life !

CHAPTER IV.

THE TRAPPING GROUNDS.

I **WAS** exceedingly surprised upon waking to see Nat within a few feet, holding two horses by the bridle.

" Which one will you choose ?" he asked, with a broad smile.

" How did you come by them ?" asked I.

" I s'pose it must have been about the time you left us last night

that Biddon woke me up and told me to follow him, as there was a *powerful* chance to get a couple of horses for you and me. I asked him where you could be, and he said he s'posed you'd gone farther up-stream to sleep by yourself, though he hadn't seen you go. Howsanever, we wasn't worried, as we thought you were old enough to take care of yourself, so we started down the bed of the stream. We went about a half a mile, when Biddon showed me a small camp fire, burned down to a few coals and ashes; but there was enough light to show us two horses picketed a few yards away, and we seen the feet of a couple of red-skins turned toward the fire. Biddon said as how they was a couple of hunters, sound asleep, and we might *borror* their horses, if I didn't make too much noise. He told me to stand still, and keep my gun pointed at them, and the minute one stirred to shoot him, and then rush in, and dispatch the other. I promised to do so, and he stole around to the horses on his hands and knees. He had cut both the halts and was leading them away, when one of the Indians raised his head and looked around, and as soon as he seen the horses moving off, give a grunt and jumped up and run toward them. I remembered it was my duty to shoot, and as the Indian was running pretty fast, I aimed about ten feet ahead of him, supposing of course, the villain would git there as soon as the bullet did; I'd be hanged if he wasn't mean enough to stop, and let the bullet be wasted. My gun kicked like blazes, and the Injuns I s'pose thought a whole tribe was upon them; for setting up a great howl, they *scouted* off in the darkness, leaving us alone with the animals. Running back, I overtook Biddon, who was ridding along as though nothing had happened. He asked me to ride, and of course I jumped on, and here I am. But which horse do you want?"

"I do not see as there is much room for choice," I replied. "both are splendid animals, and a most opportune blessing."

"If it's all the same to you, this gentleman is mine;" and handing the bridle of one to me, he vaulted upon the other. The latter was a magnificent Indian pony, of a deep bay color, probably captured when very young, and high spirited and fiery.

Both manifested considerable uneasiness, knowing they were in the hands of strangers, and Nat's made one or two efforts to dislodge him; but he was a good horseman, and maintained his place with apparent ease, despite the struggles, which were frantic and desperate at first. Mine was somewhat larger, of a coal black color, and with as much spirit and fire as the other, but in a few moments we had them both under perfect control.

Besides these two animals, we gained two fine Indian saddles, and were now as well mounted as we could wish. Nat remarked, that when the buffaloes threatened by he felt some apprehension for me, but the trapper expressed none, saying that I would be found all right in the morning. As soon as

there was light, Nat commenced searching the bed of the stream for me, and failing in this, he climbed a tree and took a survey of the prairie on both sides. From his elevation he discovered what he believed to be my dead body; and accompanied by Billon and the horses, hastened toward me. Upon reaching me, they understood instantly the whole matter, and it was their loud laughter that had aroused me.

We were now pretty far to the north-west of Nebraska Territory. The face of the country was materially different, and I began to notice a change of temperature. The summer was just closed, and the early autumn was like the approach of winter. The nights were cool and chilling, and the days generally mild at noon, but often keen and exhilarating. The prairie was mostly of the rolling kind, but belts of timber were more common, and the vegetation richer and more exuberant. It was plain, too, that we were in a section where the foot of civilization had not been. The vast, undulating swell of the prairie, the mighty fields of verdure and the broad streams, bore only the marks of the red-man and wild beast.

Toward noon, Nat descried a solitary antelope far ahead. It was near a grove, from which it had just wandered, and stood gazing wonderingly at our approach. We rode on in silence for some time, when Billon raised his hand.

"Jes hold on," he said, as he dismounted.

He made a circuit, skirting the prairie, so as to reach the grove mentioned upon the opposite side from the antelope. I still was at a loss to understand his intention, as the animal was too distant from the timber to be brought down with a rifle-shot from that point.

On the outer edge of the grove, next to the antelope, I saw him emerge, holding a stick over his head, to which was affixed a handkerchief or rag. He walked a short distance, and then lay down flat upon the prairie, perfectly concealed in the grass. The rag was visible flapping above him. I now watched the motions of the antelope. He stood gazing at us, until the trapper came into view, when, with a startled glance at him, he wheeled and ran. In a moment, however, he paused and turned quickly around. His looks were now fixed upon the fluttering signal. He stood motionless a moment, and then cautiously lifting his foot, made a step toward it. Thus he continued to approach, step by step, with apparent fear, yet evidently impelled by an overpowering curiosity, until he was scarcely twenty yards distant from the prairie form of the trapper. Still he was moving slowly onward, when suddenly the sharp crack of Billon's rifle reached us. We saw the antelope give a wild leap into the air, and bounding forward, fall to the ground. The trapper sprang to his feet and hastened to the fallen animal.

"Let us ride to him," said I, walking my horse onward.

We had ridden a short distance when Nat asked:

"What's got into Biddon? Just look at him!"

I did look, and for a moment believed him crazy. He had seen us approaching, and was now making various gesticulations. I watched him a moment, and then remarked:

"He is either signaling for us to come on or to stop."

"He means us to wait, I guess, and we had better do so."

We reined in our horses and watched him. Apparently satisfied with our stopping, he stooped and commenced scratching his back. In a few moments he arose, and slinging a rifle over his shoulder, made his way into the grove. He remained there in due time, and made his way toward us, notwithstanding, meanwhile, for us to remain in our places.

"Why didn't you wish us to approach?" I asked, as soon as he came within speaking distance.

He made no answer, but throwing his meat over the ground, hastily mounted his horse. Then he spoke in a deep whisper:

"Boys, did you s'pose there's over twenty red skins among them trees?"

"Heavens! it isn't possible!" I exclaimed.

"It's so; I see'd 'em, and thar' eyes are on us this minute. They're waitin' for us to go on, an' they'll give us thunder."

"What's to be done?" queried Nat.

"Jes' keep still, an' don't kick up, or they'll see it. We've got to make a run for it. Keep close to me, and when I start, let your horses went."

"But the meat?" I hurriedly asked.

"Can't take it. We may have a long run, an' our horses won't want to carry no extra load. I didn't see thar' animals, but I guess they ain't mounted. Ready."

With this, Biddon wheeled his horse, and vanished from his place with the speed of lightning, while ours almost simultaneously shot ahead like an arrow. An instant after, I heard the faint discharge of guns, and looking back, saw a host of savage forms pouring hastily from the timber.

"No need of hurrying. They are not mounted," I called out to Nat, who was hurrying his horse to the utmost.

"I don't believe it," he exclaimed, speeding ferociously on.

"Go it, Todd! you'll fetch up at Laramie," yelled Biddon.

The latter drew his horse into a steady canter, and increased in several hundred yards at the five minutes. Nat continued on in the mad career, but, seeing how far behind he had left us, he reined up and awaited our approach.

The savages, in the mean time, were hurrying on in pursuit. I know not what led them to expect any success in the chase, for, as remarked, not one was mounted. They may have had little faith in the speed or bottom of our horses, and trusted they would be able to run us down. Biddon half turned in his seat, and looking back a moment, asked:

"Do you see that red, diggin' like all mad off on one side? The one as is tryin' to surround us?"

I glanced back and answered in the affirmative.

"Do you want to see a red drop in purty style?"

I answered again in the affirmative.

"Wal, jis' keep yer peeper on him."

So saying, he raised his rifle, without checking the speed of his horse, took a quick aim along its long barrel and fired. To our astonishment, the Indian uttered a wild shriek, and springing high in the air, fell to the earth.

"He's done for," remarked the trapper, quietly. "While I hold my iron, 'sposen you try your hand."

I raised mine to my shoulder, and pointing it toward a conspicuous savage, pulled the trigger. As might be expected, I came about as near to him as I did to Nat, in front.

"It will take a long time for me to accomplish that feat," said I.

"Wal, yer goes ag'in."

And again was the fatal rifle discharged, and again did a savage bite the dust.

Still the pursuers maintained their ground, seemingly determined to overtake us at all hazards. They were separating and scattering over the prairie, with the evident intention of hemming us in. At this moment we came up to Nat.

"Why don't you run?" he asked, impatiently. "They'll shoot us all afore we know it."

He had scarcely finished his words, when the pursuers did fire, and with an uncomfortable effect, too. The bullets were plainly heard whistling through the air beside us, and one actually cut its way through the upper part of Nat's hat, some eight or ten inches from the crown of his head. He dodged nervously, and jerking the hat off his head, held it up to view.

"Just look there!" he exclaimed, indignantly, putting his finger through the orifice.

"What of it?" gruffly asked Bidlon.

"That's a pretty question to ask, I should think! I swear I won't stand any such work as this."

And giving his horse the rein, he shot rapidly ahead.

"I guess we might as well," remarked Bidlon, letting his horse have free rein.

The race was now decided. At such speed as we went, of course the pursuers were soon left behind, and in an hour not one was visible, all of them being either distressed, or having voluntarily withdrawn.

It is not necessary to give the particulars of our journey to the north-west. We continued traveling onward for six days, when we reached the region where it was intended we should remain until spring. This was much farther northward than I suspected; in fact, it was but a few miles distant from the

Hudson Bay Territory, and upon one of the remote tributaries of the Missouri. We had entered a climate that, even now, was like the winter of the one we had left. We had entered a mighty wilderness, where, ere we left it, we were doomed to pass through strange experiences.

Beaver signs were detected at several streams which we crossed during the last day or two of our journey, but Bidlox paid no attention to them until about the middle of the afternoon, when we reached a small river, flowing nearly due south, passing through the Hudson Bay Territory in its course. When upon the opposite side, he remarked:

"Yer's the spot whar' we're goin' to squat."

It is perhaps worth remarking that the section was a wooded country. We had passed over no clear prairie during the day, and were in the midst of a deep wood. The trees were of nearly every conceivable kind—cottonwood predominating, with oak, elm, ash, walnut, etc.

After crossing, the trapper headed directly up-stream for a short distance, when he turned to the left and descended into a valley. Here he dismounted.

"Take yer fixins'," said he, "and turn the hosses loose."

"Won't they wander away?" I asked.

"Yourn may, but mine won't. Got to take your chances. 'Tain't likely they'll be 'sturbed, 'cept by grizzlys and reds."

It was a broad bottom of rich grass, inclosed by thick walls of undergrowth. Here we left our horses, and, taking our saddles and trappings, moved away.

"Have you ever been here before?"

"I staid yer last season, but didn't 'spect to come back. Howsumever, I changed my mind, and yer we is. Move keerful and don't make a big trail."

We followed nearly a quarter of a mile directly up-stream, when he halted and looked carefully about him.

"I don't s'pose thar's reds 'bout, but thar's no tellin'. I didn't see none last year, but they mought be 'bout now. Jes' hold on a minute."

The banks of the stream were fringed by a deep undergrowth upon both sides. Stepping forward to the water's edge, the trapper parted the branches, and glancing a moment within, motioned for us to approach.

"It's all right," said he, "there hain't been no reds pokin' 'bout yer' while I's gone."

With this he stooped and pushed a small canoe into the water and slipped within it.

We joined him, although our combined weight brought the frail vessel down to its very gunwales. It was made of bark after the Indian fashion, very light, but strong. Bidlox dipped a long Indian paddle in the water and we moved slowly up-stream. After going a short distance, he again touched the

bank, and from beneath another lot of shrubbery drew forth a number of beaver-traps. These were similar to the common trap used in all parts of the world, and set much after the same fashion, but with a very different bait. At every point where signs of the animals were visible, he dug down the bank, so as to make a certain side perpendicular. Just beneath the surface of the water he then placed the trap. The next and last proceeding was to smear the banks around with a very odoriferous oil, obtained from the beaver itself. This smell attracts the beavers in the vicinity, who immediately swim to the shore to learn more of it. The trap is so arranged that one is sure to place his foot directly upon it for support in ascending the bank, and the natural consequence follows. He is caught and falls into his mortal enemy's hands.

"If we don't have a dinner on beaver-tails to-morrow, then I'm a beaver," remarked Biddon, after he had set all his traps and headed his canoe down-stream.

"A dinner on beaver tails!" exclaimed Nat, in astonishment. "That must be a fine dinner, I swow."

"If you had read much of these animals, you would know that the part mentioned by Biddon is the most delicious and nourishing portion," said I.

"And when you gits a bite of it, you'll find it so I reck-ers!"

"Perhaps so," replied Nat, doubtingly; "but whar' ar' you going to take us?"

"You'll find out when we get thar'."

The trapper rowed the canoe quite a distance down-stream, when he sheered in to shore close to where a huge chestnut tree, larger than any I had ever before seen, overhung the water. Its base was enveloped by a mass of undergrowth, denser than common, and we were obliged to stoop to the edge of the boat before we could make our way beneath it. As we sprung up the bank, it pulled up behind us, and I then noticed that the chestnut was hollow, and had a deep orifice at its base.

"Foller," commanded Biddon, stooping and crawling.

We did so, although there was some hesitation upon my part, and my astonishment was unbounded at what I witnessed when within. At first nothing was visible but the darkness, and I stood, fearful of advancing or retreating.

"Where are you, Biddon," asked Nat, in a slightly wavering tone. The next instant the trapper struck a light; and as its rays lit the chamber I repeat, my astonishment was unbounded. We were standing in an open space, at least eight feet in diameter. The chestnut was but a mere shell, with its trunk but a few inches in thickness at the most. The interior of this was fitted up like a house. The rotten chunks upon the sides had been torn down, and formed a pleasant, velvety carpet beneath the feet. All around the walls were hung

numerous furs, and a pile at one side afforded a bed such as we had not enjoyed for weeks. Added to all this, there was an arrangement so as to make it perfectly easy and convenient to kindle a fire. Nat was the first to express his unbounded astonishment.

"This beats all. I never seen any thing like it. But don't the Injins know any thing of it?"

"No, sir; and I calculate as how they won't, neither, if you don't tell 'em."

"Oh! I won't tell them. I swow this is queer," and he looked slowly about and above him. "What's that hole for?" he asked, pointing to a small orifice just visible far above us.

"That's fur the smoke to go out."

"But it must be likely to attract attention," I remarked.

"I never start a fire 'cept at night."

"I see—wonderful!" and I, too, gazed admiringly about me. The light made the whole interior visible. The dark, stained-colored fragments of decayed wood hung in ponderous masses above us, and the immense diameter gradually tapered as it ascended, until only the small opening, far above, was seen, resembling a faint star. The thickness of the wood, together with the great number of furs, protected us so well from the cold, that there could be little need of fire in the coldest weather except for cooking purposes.

"This is rather odd, I allow, to you, Jarvey; but if you had been with me down on the Yulderstone, you'd seen scum' as would 've made you look, you would. You may shoot me, if you wouldn't."

"I suppose I should, but not more than this has."

"Mebbe not; but don't stand gapin' there all day. It's gittin' dark, and we'll have our fodder."

The fire was now started, and the smoke ascended freely, escaping at the orifice. A good slice of meat was cooked, and we made a hearty supper upon it. After this the fire was allowed to slumber, but the light remained burning until a late hour. We lit our pipes, and chatted dreamily for a long time in our new home. The trapper, feeling in the mood, related many reminiscences of his life, including adventures both true and comical, and Nat gave a few of his own experiences. At a late hour we ceased, and fell into a peaceful dreamless slumber.

When I awoke the trapper had disappeared. Nat was stretched beside me still asleep. In a short time the former entered as noiselessly as he had departed.

"What fortune?" I asked.

"Good; had two fat tellers. Wake up, and we'll have a meal as is a meal."

Nat soon made a movement, and, after several yawns, he came fully awake. The trapper kindled a small fire, and

cooked his beaver-tails. The two made as choice and delicious a meal as I had ever eaten. Nat was convinced.

The day was clear and pleasant, and Bidson expressed his determination of going up the stream in order to see the signs of game. I accompanied him, but Nat chose to remain at home and sleep a few hours longer.

We wandered carelessly forth up the stream through the tangled underwood. It was a clear day in autumn; the air was keen and bracing, and the woods gloriously fine. Some of the leaves were just beginning to fall, and they made a dappled and happy carpet for our feet, rustling with a soft, pleasant sound at every step. Now and then we could hear the shrill notes of some songster of the forest, and once or twice the faint bay of some distant animal.

We had wandered some distance, when Bidson proposed turning back, as he had just discovered he had forgotten his gun. I was too well pleased, however, with the prospect to return on my footsteps. Accordingly, we parted company for a time, he remarking that probably he would return when he had completed his indispensable article.

Left alone I now wandered dreamily onward in a pleasant reverie, hardly conscious of what I was doing, until I was aroused to my senses by the grandeur of a new scene that suddenly burst upon my view. I had ascended a small rise on the bank of the stream, from which I had an extended view of the river. I stood for a moment rapt in the glories of the scene. Far behind could be discerned the broad bosom of the river, stretching away like a vast body of molten silver, bordered on either side by the mighty forest, until it disappeared in a sweeping curve, within the interminable wilderness. Above me the same winding course could be seen, brightly glistening for several miles. Not a ripple disturbed the surface save when a bird skimmed over it, just tipping its wings, and making a flitting circle or two. The blue sky above, unflecked by a single cloud, harmonized so well with the magnificent view, that I stood a long time, drinking in the splendor of the scene.

My eye was still resting upon the glistening bend of the river above, when the quietness of the scene was interrupted by a dark speck which suddenly came in view around a curve about a mile above. At first I supposed it to be some animal or log floating upon the surface; but as I looked at it, I saw to my astonishment that it was a canoe coming down-stream. Several men were visible, yet their number, at that distance, was uncertain. The bright dash of their paddles was visible in the morning sunshine, and they maintained their place near the center of the stream.

I scrutinized them, vainly, to make out their number, until it occurred to me that it would be best to make myself invisible. The approaching canoe might contain nothing but Indians, and

It was not desirable that our presence in this section should be known to any but ourselves. I slipped behind the trunk of a tree, nearer the water, yet still upon the elevated knoll, which entirely concealed my body from sight.

From this point I watched the approach of the canoe with interest. Soon it came high enough to enable me to distinguish the forms within it. There were two Indian warriors, seated, each with a paddle in his hand, but not using them, except to keep the canoe in the channel, and in the stern, with a paddle out, sat a young female. I supposed her a squaw, belonging to the same tribe with her companions, and scrutinized her as closely as my position would permit. She wore a beautiful head-dress, gayly ornamented with stained porcupine quills and beads, and a brilliant crimson shawl enveloped her slight form. The savages maintained their places as motionless as statues, their gaze apparently resting upon the stream behind them; while that of the female was fixed upon the stream in front, and her whole attention absorbed in directing her canoe.

I know not whether the inmates discovered me before I concealed myself, but I fancied I detected a glance of the Indians at my hiding-place, as they floated slowly by, and some caused the female, when directly opposite, and but a few hundred feet distant, to turn her face toward me. Judge of my astonishment, at perceiving that she was not an Indian—but a white woman! Her appearance, as she turned her gaze directly upon the spot where I was standing, I can never forget. She was so close at hand, and my view so perfect in the clear sunlight, that I saw every feature. The pale white face, surrounded by dark, luxuriant hair falling upon the shoulders, the dark eyes shaded by long inky lashes, and the mute, untranslatable look, haunted me for many a night after. She merely glanced toward me, and slowly floated past.

Dropping upon my hands and knees, I crept hastily from the knoll into the undergrowth below, and made my way hurriedly but noiselessly to the stream. I could not have been over a minute in so doing, but when I reached the water, and peered through the bushes, not a trace of the canoe was visible. I looked closely into each shore, up and down the stream, everywhere that I could look, but could not detect the slightest ripple or movement to account for this mysterious disappearance. For over an hour I waited in the hope that the canoe would reappear, but I saw nothing more of it.

CHAPTER V.

CONVERSATIONS AND PLANS.

THE disappearance of the canoe, although singular in itself had nothing supernatural about it. The shrubbery, which overhung the water on either shore, offered a secure and impenetrable hiding place, and a few dexterous, vigorous strokes of the oars were all that was needed to send it beneath their shadows. That this had been done, was plainly evident. Yet why had it been done? What motive was there for concealment? And why, if apprehensive of danger, had the Indians waited till they were in its vicinity?

I carefully retraced my steps down-stream again. The whole proceeding was mysterious. I had, doubtless, exposed myself while watching the canoe and its occupants, and thus betrayed to an enemy our presence in their country. What would result from this I could not conjecture, and determined to make every thing known to the trapper. But then I felt somewhat fearful of this. He would, doubtless, be incensed at my thoughtlessness, which might compel him to leave a country offering such inducements to the trapper and fur-trade; and I argued it was not certain that I had really been seen by the Indians in question. If they meditated hostility, Bidson would be warned soon enough for all purposes—and so I decided to keep my own secret for the present.

But the question which occupied my thoughts, almost to the exclusion of every thing else, was the identity of the female in the canoe. What could bring a white maiden to these wild regions? What meant her appearance in the canoe with two Indian warriors? What if she was the child which Bidson had referred to, as being captured upon the night of the massacre? This thought intensified the interest I already felt in her. I believed she had seen me; and her silent look toward the shore had something more than curiosity in it. I imagined there was a mute, eloquent appeal in those dark eyes.

I reached the tree, and, stooping upon my hands and knees, crawled within. The movement had well-nigh cost me my life. As my head entered I encountered the alarmed visage of Nat, and Bidson, with his knife drawn, just preparing to spring upon me.

"You liked to get rubbed out that time!" he exclaimed, replacing his weapon. "What made you forget the sign?"

"It must have been because it did not occur to me," I replied; "I have had no occasion to use it, and forgot it altogether; but I will remember it, be assured, in future."

"You'd better, for I was just going to shoot, too," added Nat, rising to his feet, and then seating himself again.

"You shoot?" repeated Bidden, contemptuously. "You're shooter ain't loaded?"

"I forgot that. I wonder if I couldn't load it, say?" he indignantly demanded.

"Yes, in course, if the reds waited fur yer."

Nat made no reply to this, except that of instantly proceeding to load his piece. As it was near noon, the meal was prepared—this time from the beaver's body. The hair was singed off from a piece, which was then cooked in the usual manner. This, although very palatable, was not equal to the tail of the animal, the meat being more tough and oily.

Shortly after, the trapper departed for the purpose of visiting his traps, and setting new ones. When alone with Nat I determined to impart to him my morning's experience.

"Nat, I have seen Indians," I remarked, in a quiet tone.

"You bain't!" he exclaimed, starting up from his bed of skins with such suddenness as to break the remains of his pipe.

"I have; and what is more they have seen me."

"I should think it was considerably more! What did you do? I didn't hear you shoot. Why didn't you tell Bidden? Why didn't you—why, it seems to me you're very cool about it."

"There is no occasion for excitement at all. Just remain quiet, and I will tell you how it all happened."

And thereupon I related the particulars. Nat's wonder and apprehension were roused to the highest pitch. Springing to his feet, he pulled his hat violently over his forehead, and smiling about a moment, demanded:

"Why *didn't* you tell Bill? Like as not he'll be shot and scalped before he gets back."

"You are not afraid, I hope?"

"Oh no! not a bit; but then you know it's rather unpleasant to feel that those infernal Blackfeet are all about you, and waiting for a chance to shoot you from behind every bush."

"Nat," I commenced, earnestly, "you say you are not afraid of Indians, and yet you show it in every word, look, and action. There is no excuse for this. I saw only two savages, and a girl, evidently a captive. They disappeared suddenly, and were, probably, frightened at my presence. I see nothing in this to excuse the excitement and terror you have exhibited."

"I wonder who that girl is?"

"I am afraid you will have to wonder a long time."

"Is she good looking?" asked my companion, seriously.

"Very. What makes you ask that question?"

"I declare, if I don't marry her just to spite Alamy, and make Bill Hawkins mad," he exclaimed, joyously.

At this point I could restrain my mirth no longer; but, as I

indulged it, I was considerably surprised to feel a slight twinge of jealousy at his words.

"I am afraid you will meet with formidable obstacles, before you can accomplish that; the most difficult of which will be to obtain an audience with the fair one herself."

"Don't suppose she'd be very anxious to see me; and I wouldn't care if I only had my pipe and jack-knife to pass away time with."

"I think it would be as well not to mention this affair to Bidlon."

"Why not?"

"It can do no good, and he would be displeased at the thoughtlessness I have evidenced. I do not think there are savages enough in the vicinity to render us fearful of our safety. The canoe, I am disposed to believe, belongs to some tribe quite distant from here."

"But what are they here for?"

"I can only conjecture. Bidlon has never seen savages in this particular section, and these may be returning from some journey to their tribe."

"Perhaps so, and may be not. These plagued Injins sometimes live in one place and sometimes in another, you know, and it may be that a notion has just entered their heads to come and live in these parts."

"There is reason in what you say, but, as I stated, if danger threatens, Bidlon will detect its signs himself in time."

"I think he will, though I shall feel a little flustered every time he goes out. You remember when he was after the antelope, he walked right among the Injins, without knowing it till it was too late to stop."

"He did, it is true, but how nicely he walked out again. I tell you, Nat, that fellow has nerve equal to any emergency. What man, when conscious of an overwhelming foe being concealed within a few feet of him, could have repressed every sign of trepidation or fear, as he did?"

"It was a clever thing, I allow."

"Bidlon told me he felt a little nervous when he saw us start to come up, for, if we had reached him, it would have been all up with us. Such a man, I repeat, will scent danger soon enough without the help of others."

"He will, and I hope he'll find out who that white girl is."

"Nat, do you remember the account Bidlon gave some time ago of a horrible massacre, upon the sandy island near where we encamped one night?"

"I don't think there is much likelihood of my forgetting it."

"You will also recall his account of the capture of a small child by the savages? Now, it has occurred to me that ~~the~~ might be that child grown to womanhood."

"I know it is!" exclaimed Nat, joyously.

"It is true there is much against it. It was a great distance from here, but, as these savages wander hundreds of miles at times, it is not improbable upon that ground. Instances are only too common of persons spending their lives in captivity among these Indian tribes. She is a captive, beyond a doubt, and must long for restoration to her home and friends."

"As I said, we will say nothing of this to Billon, until he discovers signs of Indians himself. To-morrow, we will go forth together, and spend the day in endeavoring to gain trace of the canoe and its inmates; and if any thing is discovered which is alarming we will impart it all to him."

This Nat agreed to, and shortly after we heard three raps upon the outside of the tree—the trapper's sign of his presence. A moment after, he made his appearance. He was considerably elated at his prospect for a goodly quantity of furs; had set a number of traps; was sure of half a dozen next day; had seen no signs of Indians, and was convinced there were none in the vicinity. None of us passed out again that day, but remained indulging in our pipes and conversation as usual until a late hour.

The next morning the trapper proposed that I should accompany him upon his daily round. I complied, while Nat remained behind.

The day was as warm and pleasant as the preceding one, and the forest and stream as delightful. Biddon pulled slowly up the unrippled surface, and in a short time reached the first trap; it had not been disturbed. Still hopeful, he passed on to the second and third and all the others. But there were no signs of beaver in any.

"Shoot me, that's queer!" he exclaimed, thoughtfully, as he saw the last one. "I don't understand it; I must get out and take a look round."

He sprung ashore, and minutely examined the ground around. A few seconds sufficed. He looked up with a gleam of deep meaning and said:

"Here's the track of a thunderin' moccasin. The reds have found us out."

He stepped into the canoe, and taking the paddle, moved it carefully back again. He touched at each trap on the way. The footprints of a stranger were visible at each.

"That's been a beaver taken out of that pool!" he remarked, as the last one was reached. "It's lucky for the streakin' coward that I didn't see him. He wouldn't stoop to my little gentlemen's traps."

"Are you sure it is an Indian who has been troubling you?"

"Wagh! Don't you s'pose I could tell a red's track from a grizzly's?"

"But it might have been a white man—some hunter or trapper?" I suggested.

"A white man wouldn't be mean 'nough to do sich a thing, less 'r war' some of these Hudson Bay fellers. They try them tricks sometimes, but they git come up to. I catched a feller once from Fort Hall at mine, and the way I walked into him war' a caution; but this ar' an Injin's track."

"Do you suspect there could be a number in the vicinity?"

"Ef there war' I'd 've heard of 'em afore. This is some varmint sneakin' round yer, and he's got to be rubbed out afore he makes more trouble."

"I fear that will be a difficult and dangerous job."

"Let me be for that."

Shortly after we reached our home, and running the canoe beneath the bushes, entered it. We were somewhat surprised to find Nat absent. He returned, however, in a short time, and I saw at once by his nervous, flustered manner that something unusual had occurred. Bidlon questioned him rather closely, as he suspected something, but Nat evaded his inquiries, and would not admit that he had seen any thing to excite alarm.

"I'm goin' out, and when I come back I'll tell you what's the matter with them traps," said Bidlon, departing.

I waited until he was beyond hearing, and then turning to my companion, asked:

"What is the matter with you, Nat?"

"Why?" he asked, with a start.

"Because you show plainly that something has occurred."

He remained silent a moment, then seizing his hat, jerked it off his head, and threw it pitifully down, where he gazed at it a second, exclaiming:

"I'm sick of this!"

"Sick of what?"

"Why, of being in this fix."

"I don't understand you. Please explain what you mean."

"I should think you ought to know."

"But I do not."

"Why, this wood is full of Injins: they're behind every tree and stump, and in every bush, and you can hardly step without pitching over some painted heathen."

"I am afraid you are exaggerating," I answered, suppressing a smile which was struggling at the corners of my mouth.

"No, I ain't. I swear there are ten thousand Injins just waiting outside to pounce upon us."

"You are talking nonsense, and you know it."

"Well, there's one Injin, for I seen him. Come now," he affirmed, as if the matter was now settled beyond a question.

"Ah! that alters the case considerably. I shouldn't wonder at all if there is one or a half dozen savages in the forest."

"If you see one savage I haven't you a right to suppose there's hundred more about, I should like to know?"

"Not always, Nat; I have seen three myself, yet I do not

believe there is another one in the neighborhood. But I have not heard the particulars of this affair of which you have been speaking. Please let me hear them."

"There isn't much to tell, but there is enough to make you do a heap of thinking. You see, after you had left, I took a notion that I must have a morning ramble; and I thought, too, there might be such a thing as you two running into danger and needing my help (I should like to know what you are laughing at). Taking my rifle, I was soon making my way as noiselessly as possible, in a direction from the river.

"I hadn't gone more than a dozen yards before I commenced thinking about Injins, and came nigh going back again. I wasn't afraid at all, you know, but then it appeared to me I might bring you and Bidlon into trouble. However I kept on. I had gone some distance further, when all of a sudden I heard a terrible whirr and rattle, and jumped clean off my feet. But it was only a big owl which I had stirred up. I was so provoked at the start he gave me, that I should have wrung his neck had I got my hands upon him. But I went on. Pretty soon I reached a little stream of water, and as I jumped across, what do you suppose I saw in the sand?"

"I am sure I can not tell."

"Nothing less than a big moccasin-track. And what was more, it hadn't been made there a week before! I stood and looked at it a good while, cogitating some wonderful things. At last I stooped and went to measuring it. I was just going to rise, when I heard a grunt right by me. I jumped up so quick—to be ready, you know—that I tumbled backward into the water. And I may be shot if there wasn't a big painted Injin standing not ten feet off. He didn't say a word but just stood and looked at me with them awful eyes of his. As soon as I could think, I raised my gun, took a quick aim, and pulled the trigger; but the infernal gun snapped. I pulled it again, but it wouldn't go, and just then I happened to think the thing wasn't loaded. All this time the painted Injin stood grinning at me, without saying a word, except to kinder grunt. He held a big shining gun in one hand, and I was dreading afraid he would shoot it. I told him not to stir, but to stand still till I got mine loaded, and he waited. But somehow or other, I s'pose I was in such a hurry that things wouldn't go right. Instead of putting the powder in the gun barrel, I crammed it in my pocket, and jammed the ramrod into my shoe. I told the Injin to have patience and I'd get it loaded in a minute. I got it fixed somehow at last and backed it up to my shoulder, when, lo! Injin was there! I looked behind, all about me, and up into the trees, but he'd been spirited away somewhere. However, I made up my mind to shoot at the spot where he had stood, and I up and blazed away. That is I blazed away without the gun going off. I believe he spirited that too."

"Let me examine it. Perhaps you made some blunder."

"No, I'm sure I didn't."

I took the rifle, with a smile of certainty that I should find something the matter with it. Sure enough, the muzzle was crammed with paper, and upon removing it, a *pipe stem*, broken in pieces, rolled out, while there was not a grain of powder in the barrel.

"I declare I forgot about the powder!" exclaimed Nat, covering his eyes in wonder.

"But not about the bullet," I laughed, pointing to the fragments of his pipe.

Nat picked up the fragments and examined them carefully.

"That's my pipe, sure; and I had it in my mouth, I remember, when I started out, and missed it coming back. I didn't put it in the gun though."

"Let it pass. Did you see no more of your Indian friend?"

"No; he knew enough to keep out of my way. I waited a long time for him, and at last started home at midnight. I kept an eye on every suspicious object, but, as I just said, seen nothing."

At this point I gave free vent to my perturbed mind. Nat, much astonished, looked wonderingly at me, seemingly at a loss to understand the cause.

"I do not see what there is to laugh at," he remarked, reprovingly. "If it's a laughing matter to know that there are Indians all about you, why you must laugh."

"Your adventure with the Indian, Nat, and the singular lead in your rifle, appears to me a funny matter, and I trust you will pardon me it—"

"Didn't I tell you I didn't put it in there? It was the Indian's work."

And to this day Nat can not be made to believe that he was instrumental in introducing the pipe into his gun.

After a few more unimportant remarks, the conversation ceased. Nat's adventure began to appear to me in a different form from that in which I had viewed it at first. I doubted not but that he was perfectly honest and truthful in what he said. But why, when exposed to the wild of the savage, did he escape unscathed? Why did the latter stand fearless and harmless before him? And what meant these strange signs, these "foot prints," which were becoming visible around us? Matters were assuming a puzzling form. We were being envied by Indians without any evidence of hostility upon their part. What meant it? Surely there was a meaning too deep and hidden for us to divine as yet.

Suddenly Nat spoke.

"Don't you remember the canoe? We were going to hunt for that to-day!"

"Ah! how did I forget that? But had we not better wait till Biddon returns?"

"No; let us go at once. Hark! what's that?"

I held my breath, as the distant report of a rifle reached our ears. The next instant came a sound, faint and far away yet clear and distinct—a horrid, unearthly sound, as the cry of a being in mortal agony!

CHAPTER VI.

STILL IN THE DARK—THE CANOE AGAIN.

For a moment we stood paralyzed. Then our eyes sought each other with a look of fearful inquiry.

"Was that Bidlon's voice?" I asked in a faint whisper.

"I don't know. There it is again!"

And again came that wild, howling shriek of such agony as made our blood curdle within us.

"*It is his voice!* Let us listen to his call," I exclaimed, catching my rifle, and springing out. Not followed closely, his gun having been reloaded. The cry came from up the river, and toward it we dashed, scrambling and tearing through the brush and undergrowth like two madmen, each with his doubts of what the consequence might be. Several times we halted and listened, but heard nothing save our own panting breaths and beating hearts. On again we dashed, looking fearfully about us, until I knew we had ascended as high as could be the author of that startling cry. Here we paused and listened. No one was to be seen. I turned toward Nat standing behind me, and directly behind him I saw Bidlon slowly approaching.

"What are you doing here?" he asked, as he came up.

"Was not that your voice I just heard?"

"I rather reckon it wasn't. When you hear Bill Bidlon howl out in that way, just let me know, will yer?"

"What was it?" I asked, greatly relieved.

"That's more nor me can tell; but shoot and skin me, if I can't tell you one thing;" he approached closely and whispered, "there's snakin' else nor nois about yer."

"What do you mean?" I asked, although I understood well enough what he meant.

"I's here once atter as I told yer, and I never heard snakin' on'ten. I've seen the tracks of muskrats all about the traps, but can't draw back on the suspicion of a red skin."

"You mean that howl I heard, didn't you?"

"Heard it! I should think I did."

"Was it you who shot?"

"Yes, the way on it was this, I set one party place trail and followed it up the river, when I reached the mouth of a Blackfoot's father gone down through the bushes there, and

blazed away at him. I never missed a red in my life, and I didn't miss him. However, he didn't mind it, but kept on and got away, and just as he went out of sight that awful yell came. It didn't seem that he made it, but it sounded like as though 'twas all about me, above and under the ground, and around and behind me."

"Anywhere near us?" asked Nat.

"It sounded just under your feet about."

"Jerusha!" exclaimed the affrighted Nat, as he sprung nervously toward me.

"It must have been the Indian, who made that yell," said I.

"In course; but things are beginnin' to look queerish to me."

The same look of uneasiness again passed over the trapper's face; and I saw that although he strove to hide it he was by no means at rest. Matters were beginning to put on an unusual aspect, and that was the reason. Give the trapper of the northwest flesh and blood to contend against, let him know that nothing supernatural is arrayed against him, and he is the last man in the world to yield an inch. But the moment he sees something unexplainable to his simple mind, and the trapper is a credulous being, his courage deserts him. He believes that other spirits than those of men visit this earth, and they are his greatest horror.

"Let's go home; there's Injins all around us," pleaded Nat.

"How'd you know?"

"Because I *seen* one myself."

Bidden looked inquiringly at me, and, deeming it best, I related the incident given in the preceding chapter. I saw at once his uneasiness was increased.

"Why didn't you shoot the red skin?" he asked of Nat.

"Why didn't *you* shoot the red skin?" asked Nat, in turn.

"I did—hit him fair and square as I ever hit any thing."

"But didn't do any more good than I did."

"I made the infernal imp howl."

"And I made mine *go*," added Nat, triumphantly.

"There is no need of words," I interrupted. "Each of you hit your best, Nat included. Yes, Bill, I believe, hit your man and mortally wounded him. That yell was of agony, though I can't conceive how we came to mishear it for yours." The dead or dying body of that Indian, I believe, is near at hand. See, or dying body of that Indian, I believe, is near at hand. See, what does that mean?" I asked, as I detected some red fluid dripping from the end of a stick to the earth. The trapper stepped forward and looked at it.

"That's the blood of a Blackfoot, or I'm a skinned beaver!"

replied I, with a glow of belief.

"Yes, I'm convinced that's Indian blood," added Nat, rubbing on between the tip of his finger and thumb. "The blood of a Blackfoot Indian, too—a man's about thirty-two years old. Probably a brother to the one I frightened."

"Biddon, I believe, as I just said, that we will find the body of that savage near at hand. Let us follow it."

"Jes' what I's going to do," he replied, starting at once.

It was easy to follow the trail, as every step was marked by blood, which in many places was dripping from the bushes to the ground. It was followed but a short distance, however, as it led in a direct line to the river.

"It's as I expected," said Biddon, turning round in disgust. "He's taken to the water to hide his trail, and jes' as well as not some of the other painted heathen have helped him on."

"No doubt about that. I've been thinking that some of 'em helped off that fellow when I was loading my gun."

"We mought as well go back ag'in," said Biddon. "I'm tired of hearin' spirits, and I dunno but what we'd better leave traps and leave this place to 'em."

"That's what I am in favor of—"

Nat suddenly paused, for Biddon, with a slight "sh!" motioned us down. We sunk quickly and silently to the earth, while he, in a crouching position, gazed steadily up-stream.

"What is it, Bill?" whispered Nat.

"*There's a canoe comin' down-stream.*"

We said nothing; and Nat looked meaningfully in the water.

"Skin me, if there ain't two reds and a squaw in it," called Biddon, without changing his position, or removing his gun.

I could not restrain the singular agitation that came over me at this announcement. Fearing to betray myself, I cautiously arose beside Biddon.

"Let me take a look," I whispered.

"Be keerful you ain't seen," he whispered, in turn, as he stepped back.

As I looked, I saw, not more than two hundred yards distant, the canoe approaching, heading directly toward us. For this reason, I could only see the foremost Indian, though I was positive another, together with the white captive, was in it. I gazed but a moment and then looked impudently at the trapper. He made no reply, but again peered forward.

"That ain't a squaw; it's a white gal," said he, looking round upon us with an astounded look.

"Shall we rescue her?" I asked.

"Ef she wants us to, in course."

"You going to shoot them?" asked Nat, anxiously.

"Can't tell yet. Just see that yer irons is ready, and wait till they get out yer. Don't make no noise till I give the motion."

The trapper stole a yard or two in front of us, where he sunk fully down upon his face until only his head was visible. Nat pressed his gun nervously beside me, while I, not a word less excited, waited for the canoe to appear through the interstice of the bushes in front.

In a moment, I heard the faint ripple of an oar, and saw the trapper slowly raising his head and bringing his rifle in front of him. He raised his hand warningly for us to remain quiet until the moment should arrive. I heard the click of my companion's gun, as he raised the hammer, and admonished him to be careful.

Suddenly I saw the red head-dress of one of the savages glitter through the bushes, and, before I could speak, came an explosion beside me like the crash of a thunderbolt. Almost simultaneously, the herculean frame of the trapper bounded over me, and he exclaimed:

"Who fired that? I'm shot."

Nat and I sprang to our feet and dashed after him; but as I turned, though bewildered with excitement, I looked at the spot where the canoe was seen. It was gone!

We dashed up the bank, and in a moment reached Biddon. The excitement had completely gone, and he stood coolly feeling his ear.

"Was that your gun, Jarsey?" he asked.

"No, sir; mine is still loaded."

"How is yours, Greeny?"

Nat lifted his, examined the lock and looked into the barrel. He had indeed discharged it, grazing the trapper's head so closely as to wound his ear.

"Wonder if that *was* my gun? Sure, I believe it was," he remarked, still looking into the barrel.

"Was it your gun?" repeated the trapper, his brow darkening like a thunder cloud, and laying his hand upon his knife-hilt, as he approached. Nat looked up and started as he saw his visage fairly gleaming with passion.

"I didn't shoot it, Bill, by thunder!" he expostulated.

The face of the trapper changed. It grew paler, but the dark cloud fled from it. He replaced his drawn knife. He believed the words of Nat.

Matters were approaching a crisis. The recent startling events had their effect upon us all. The trapper avowed he could not stand "sich goin's on," and should leave for some other quarters. Little sleep came to Nat, that night. His adventure with the savages, and the more recent occurrence alarmed him. He had discovered that there were consequences to be feared from both sides.

I was still unwilling to believe that there was any thing in the events given which would not soon be explained. It was evident our toes were around, and from some inexplicable cause, had pursued an unusual course toward us. We had all been exposed to their power, yet had escaped harmless. What was the meaning of this? And, above all, what was the object of the appearance and disappearance of the canoe at the different times mentioned?

These questions, prompted my anxious curiosity and a desire to learn more of that mysterious being whom I had now twice seen. I ridiculed the ideas of Biddon, and Nat strove hard to convince him that he was not afraid. Biddon consented to remain until more was learned, intimating at the same time, that it must be very soon. He visited the horses each day, and found them undisturbed. This, however, only added to his anxiety. Had they been gone he would have taken it as convincing evidence that *bona fide* Indians were in the neighborhood.

The next day, after the closing scene of the last chapter, Nat agreed to accompany me for the last time to the spot where we had seen the canoe. The trapper could not be prevailed upon to go, affirming that he should probably have his hands full at home. It required my utmost skill to succeed with Nat, as the horror had plainly settled upon him.

"It's awful!" said he, as we started, "this walking right into danger, but I want to see that canoe again, but especially that gal, and so I'll go."

"And, I trust, behave yourself. You well know, Nat, you fired that shot which came so near ending Biddon's life."

"Wonder if I did pull the trigger?" he exclaimed, suddenly stopping and looking around at me.

"You *know* you did, and had he known it too, it would have been a sorry piece of business for you. That temper of his is terrible, when it is once excited."

"I remember cocking my gun, and kind of pulling the trigger, but I didn't mean to pull hard enough to make it go off."

"I suppose not. I can not conceive how Biddon persuaded himself to believe that you did not discharge it when the case was self-evident. But he is willing to believe almost any thing since he has started."

We kept upon our way. Upon each of the occasions mentioned, as near as I could judge, it was about noon the canoe made its appearance; and as it was that time now, we hurried forward, lest the opportunity should pass. The opportunity, I say—for although it had appeared but twice as yet, I somehow or other was well satisfied we should see it again.

"What are you going to do?" asked Nat.

"It will depend upon what we see. If simply these two stragglers with the captive, as we judge her to be, and no canoe, and no demonstration is made, I think it best not to attempt a rescue. It is only a supposition of ours that she is a captive, and we know not that she would thank us for interfering in her case."

In a short time we reached the elevation already mentioned. Here we seated ourselves so as to remain concealed from any stragglers in the vicinity, while we ourselves with a little care could detect the slightest object passing. As I stooped, my hand

came in contact with something cold, and upon looking at it, I saw it covered with dark, clotted blood. I started, and wiped it on the grass, but it sent a shudder through me to reflect that it had once been the life-fluid of a human being.

"Ugh!" exclaimed Nat: "ain't that awful?"

"It is disagreeable, to say the least."

"Just look at the blood on the grass, too, and all around. I believe Bill must have hit a half-dozen Injins, sure."

"He must have wounded one terribly to make him bleed like this."

"And if he had been a flesh and blood Injin he would have never tramped in that manner. I tell you, William Richmond, there is something more than human about us. I can feel it in my bones, and I'm of Biddon's opinion that the sooner we get away from here the better."

"Fudge! I see you are beginning to get alarmed."

"Oh no; you are mistaken. I am not frightened at all. For Bill's sake, but more especially for yours, I am anxious. If you are desirous of remaining hereabouts, and will take all the consequences, I will make no objections."

"Of course, if I run into danger of my own accord, I expect that I alone will suffer the penalty."

"Then we needn't say any thing more about it; you know we pledged ourselves to remain true to each other, and I won't desert you."

"That's well spoken, Nat. The minute I am satisfied that our lives are imperilled, I shall not be the means of prolonging that peril a moment. It is only this great desire to solve and understand the singular occurrences that are transpiring around us, that leads me to still remain. I have determined that to-day we shall all be satisfied."

"My curiosity is extraordinarily high; but I guess that gal has as much to do with it as any thing else. I'm determined to get a glimpse of her face, and, if possible, whisper in her ear that Nat Todd, from Maine, is about. I flatter myself that the minute she knows that, she will jump overboard and make for shore without saying a word to the chaps with her."

"The greatest difficulty will be to convey your words to the captive, without conveying it also to her captors."

"I swear, it would be harder than I thought at first."

During this conversation, which was carried on in a half-whisper, Nat was constantly parting the bushes and peering through them, while now and then I glanced expectantly up the stream; but nothing as yet had rewarded our watchfulness. Suddenly I reflected that, as I had been twice defeated in observing the movements of the canoe, from the exact spot upon which I was now seated, we had better make a better arrangement of ourselves, so as to insure this coveted knowledge to one of us at least. I mentioned this to Nat.

"If one of us was on the other side, the thing would be certain, but that can't be done very conveniently, and we shall have to try something else."

"Suppose you go down-stream about a hundred yards, near the bend yonder," I proposed to Nat.

"Guess I will," he exclaimed, as he rose to go.

"Wait a moment," said I, detaining him. "Let me admonish you to exercise no ordinary caution, Nat, for you have seen enough to convince you that your own safety depends upon it. Remember that a word or false movement, however slight, may defeat our plans. Look out for danger to yourself, and let your curiosity be the means of your destruction. *Adieu, adieu!*"

I know not what led me to thus warn him; but at the moment he arose to go, an unaccountable sense of impending danger came over me. It was not so much for me as for him I spoke thus. He promised to heed my words and departed.

As soon as he had disappeared, I cast another look upstream, but still there were no signs of the expected canoe. A sudden apprehension that I should not see it again came over me. There was, in fact, as much reason not to expect it as to anticipate its coming, and as I looked up at the sun and saw that it was already beyond the hour, I was half-tempted to turn back. While I was debating, I naturally looked up the river, and there, just rounding the bend where the canoe had first come into view before—there it was coming! Quivering with emotion I sunk upon the ground, and gave a low whistle as a signal to Nat. He returned it, as an evidence of his watchfulness.

I saw that from where I was seated, the view would be most obstructed when the canoe was nearest. Accordingly, I crept cautiously and quickly nearer the water's edge. This time, however, I slightly varied my course, and concealed myself behind the trunk of a fallen tree. This was within a yard of the water, and afforded complete concealment. I noticed the log was rotten and apparently hollow.

Here I lay, and intently listened and watched. A few moments and an almost inaudible ripple was heard, and the canoe was opposite. I exercised extreme caution, and was fortunate enough to obtain a perfect view of each of the occupants. They were the same—the dark, malignant faces of the savages, and the fair features of the captive. She sat in the stern, her hand resting gently upon a quivering oar, and her gaze fixed upon the stream in front. The canoe floated with the current, and not a paddle was stirred, nor the least motion made by the beings before me. The head-dress of the captive was, as mentioned before, eagle feathers and porcupine-quills, while the dark waving masses of hair hung low upon the shoulders, contrasting with the whiteness of the face. A heavy crimson shawl enveloped the form, as when first seen. The features were regular,

and, perhaps, in my state of feeling, their beauty was considerably enhanced; but the thought came upon me that if there were any thing supernatural in my experience, it was in seeing such wonderful beauty as was now before me.

Unconsciously I forgot myself as the canoe was gliding past, and before I was aware, it was hidden from view by intervening obstacles. I withdrew hastily, intending to hurry further down where the view would be more complete. I had taken but a step or two when Nat's rifle was discharged, and I heard distinctly the muffled sound of his voice. Wild with agitation, I dashed to the spot where I supposed him to be. The view of the river at this point was clear, and I turned to look at the canoe. It had vanished!

I looked round for Nat, but he, too, was gone. I called him, and once thought I heard a faint answer. But it was not repeated, and I could not tell its direction. I reached the ground and beheld *the tracks of others besides his own*. I waited until near night, but Nathan Todd was never to return.

CHAPTER VII.

ALONE IN THE WILDERNESS.

"WHERE'S your friend?"

There was apprehension in the question of the trapper, or he would not have called Nat, as he had never called him before. The question was asked, too, the instant I appeared.

"I can not tell," I answered, seating myself gloomily.

"Whar'd you leave him?"

"I can not answer that, either. He went with me to watch the river, as you remember. Espying that canoe, he concealed himself a few yards away, in order to obtain a better view. Since then I have seen nothing of him."

"Was it he who shot?"

"It sounded like his gun, although I am not positive that it really was."

"I heard it an' took it for him, and shoot me, if I didn't know he'd got into some scrape."

"I fear he has, and the last one, too."

"My thoughts, exactly. Luckily you did not, too."

"I can't bear to see you here, Biddon. I can tell you, that I am willing to leave this place as soon as you wish. Let us leave to-morrow. Are you willing?"

"I'll go to-night if you want to."

"No; it will be best to wait until daylight. I have faint hopes that Nat may return."

"Waagh! you'd never see him again, and ef we're 'bout yer another day, we'll never see each other again."

"I think he has been only captured by some lurking enemy, from whom he may escape."

"No, sir; I tell you he's gone, and I reckon as how we'd better be gone too."

"Perhaps you are right, Biddon, although I shall be loath to leave the vicinity when I am not satisfied of his fate."

"I'm satisfied, an' you oughter be. Leastways, I'm goin' to-morrow, an' you kin stay and play with those Blackfeet as long as you like. I've been up to see the horses, and fixed things so as to start as soon as daylight. Any objections?"

"None at all."

"Then 'tis settled, and let's snooze."

But it was by no means settled. As I lay that night reminiscing upon the scenes through which I had so recently passed, the pledge that I had made with Nat came back to me. I had promised to remain by him as long as there was hope; to desert him now, would be a violation of that vow, and an unworthy act upon my part. For us both to leave him would probably seal his fate if alive. It was by no means certain that it was, he was irrecoverably gone, and I resolved if the morrow should depart on the morrow that I would remain.

In making this resolution, perhaps it was not the desire alone to benefit my companion that prompted it, although I aver that that alone would have been sufficient. Unconsciously, almost, I found my thoughts wandering from Nat to the being who had been the cause of all this trouble. At most I could only speculate and conjecture with regard to her, and the same speculations and conjectures I had made before. Undoubtedly she was a captive among a tribe of Indians, over whom she would have great influence; and that she was the same individual referred to by Biddon seemed certain to me. I had mentioned this thought to him, in the hope of persuading him to remain. He started somewhat at the unsuspected suggestion, and after a few moments' thought, admitted the probability of such being the case.

To my surprise I found I had completely betrayed my own plans.

"I kinder thought then, that little thing war'nt him, nor human, an' ef it's her, you see I'm partly sure now. No use talkin', I shan't stay here longer than time enough to start. It might be that gal, and ag'in it mightn't. Shoot me ef it moughtn't."

I said no more, for I saw it would be useless. When he had once determined upon a matter there was no changing him. He was satisfied that "spirits livin'" had compassed him, and there was but one way of escape for him.

He was now reposing beside me, always in the same place; and as the night was far advanced, I lay down and slept.

I awoke early and caught a glimpse of Biddon as he departed, doubtless after the horses, in order to leave at once the place

which had such terrors for him. In the course of a half-hour he returned.

"The horses are waitin'," said he.

I arose and passed out. The three animals stood outside, a short distance away, each saddled and prepared for travel.

"Come, work lively, and fetch them skins out," said Biddon. I assisted him until every thing was in readiness for starting.

"Jump on, and shoot me ef we won't soon be clar' of this outlandish place."

"Biddon, I am not going with you," I said, mildly.

"What?" he asked, looking wonderingly at me.

"I intend to remain here."

"Ogh! Jump on; it's time we started."

"I said I was going to remain here."

"Do you mean it, Jarsey?" he queried, bending such a fierce look upon me.

"Most certainly I do."

"Then, all Bill Biddon's got to say is, you're a fool."

I colored slightly at this, but made no reply.

"What yer going to stay fur? Get shot and lose yer ha'r, I s'pose, jst to please the reds."

I am sorry, friend Biddon, that you feel thus. When Nathan Tell and I left the States for this country, we pledged eternal friendship to each other, and I am sure I should never feel at ease if I should leave him in this dire extremity. I am by no means satisfied that I can afford him no assistance. He has no claims upon you, and I should not expect you to remain, but as I said, I am determined not to leave this place until I have obtained satisfactory intelligence of him."

The trapper remained silent a few moments, then spoke.

"I s'pose you mean right, Jarsey, but you're awful simple. Yer's as what boyes you'd find the other chap right side up and squar' with his ha'r on, but I don't s'pect *your* ha'r 'll be yer's to-night. Howsenever, you're bound to stay, I see, so yer's good luck. I'd like to stay with you, but I ain't backward to own Bill Biddon knocks under *this* time."

He reached his hard, lorny hand, and I took it.

"Good-by, Bill, I hope we shall meet again. We have not been long acquainted, but I trust long enough to be friends."

"And you'll remember as how ole Bill Biddon didn't mean what he said just now."

"Certainly, certainly, I know you did not."

"Wal, good-by it is, then."

I was alone in the great wilderness of the North-west.

After parting with Biddon, I remained stationary a long time, meditating upon the strange resolve that I had acted upon. If looked at with the common-sense view that the honest trapper gave it, I was sensible it was nothing less than a piece of recklessness upon my part, which only could be excused by the

motives that actuated me. I felt some regret certainly, at parting with Bidbon, for that manly heart which throbb'd within his massive breast had drawn me toward him, and I knew he had come to regard me in a far different light than he did at first. However, I was hopeful, and could not persuade myself that I was never to see him again.

Toward night the sky gave evi- lence of an approaching storm. A strong wind arose, and a melancholy, desolate meaning like the precursor of winter, could be heard at intervals in the forest. Darkness came on earlier than usual, and, as I passed into the trapper's home, the storm burst upon me. No one who has not witnessed a storm in the wilderness can appreciate its awful grandeur. As I cowered within the heart of the old forest king, its power was sublimed to my ears; but enough reached them to give me an idea of the terrific spectacle without. The huge sides of the tree surrounding me rattled and groaned as though it were yielding to the hurricane; the wind blew with such fury that at times it sounded as though wailing screams were rending the air above me; and the sharp splintering of the trees riven by the lightning, rivaled the crash of the thunderbolt itself. As the morning approached, the storm died away, and as I stepped forth the sun was shining in unclouded splendor.

Slinging my rifle over my shoulder, I wandered aimlessly forward, following the course of the stream for several hours. Becoming considerably wearied, I seated myself upon a fallen tree; but my mind was in such a state of excitement that the desire to press forward was irresistible, and I arose again.

The river at this point was flowing east and west, so that I looked to the southward. As I did so I saw Bidbon in the distance, riding leisurely away. He was miles distant, and as the prairie in many parts was submerged, it was out of the question to pursue with the hope of overtaking him. I contented myself with watching him until he disappeared. He appeared precisely the same as when Nat and I first caught sight of him; and it struck me as a rather curious coincidence that my first and last glimpse of him were similar. Soon he was a mere speck on the horizon, and presently disappeared altogether.

The storm which had just ended was the usher of the cold season. A strong wind had arisen, and was blowing coldly through the forest. The changes in these regions are remarkably sudden; and by the middle of the afternoon, bonfires were put out along the shores of the stream. I suffered much from this sudden and severe cold; and to make it worse, every thing upon which I could lay hands was so water-soaked as to make it impossible to kindle a fire.

I continued wandering aimlessly onward, until I descended a large valley, filled with trees of enormous growth. As I entered, I heard a crackling in the bushes above me. I looked

carefully about, but could detect nothing. Creeping stealthily up the bank, I came upon the cause of this apprehension. There was a species of fruit, called the "blackberry," quite common here, and in among them, seated on his haunches, and contentedly devouring them, was a grizzly bear. I started as I took in his colossal form, and turned to make a hasty retreat; but curiosity held me to the spot. He was a large beast; his massive form being enveloped in a coat of long, black, glossy hair, and his eyes small and glittering. His long nose reached among the leaves, as he pulled the bushes toward him, and plucked the delicate fruit.

At that once a mad desire to take this formidable creature's life came upon me. I knew it was only the most skilled hunter who could prevail against him, and yet I determined to take the risk. As he sat, his side was turned toward me, and I made a low whistle to attract his attention. He stopped chewing incessantly, and turned his head toward me as if listening. I could see his two coal-black eyes glistening plainly. I was lying upon my face, with my rifle resting upon a stone in front. Holding the hammer, I took a deliberate, sure aim at one of his eyes, and pulled the trigger.

"How does that suit?" I asked, excitedly. To my surprise and terror, I saw him sitting apparently motionless, but looking about him, as if to ascertain from what direction the shot had come. The next instant he caught sight of the British wreath from my rifle, and, with a low growl, plunged directly toward me.

That enormous body could not roll over the ground much faster than I suspected, and I found that, when alarmed, I could also move rapidly. But in the tangled undergrowth I was no match for him, as he crashed through it without the least inconvenience. I saw he would assuredly overtake me before I could go a hundred yards farther; so throwing my rifle to the ground, I drew my knife and waited his attack. As he came rushing toward, the blood from his wound trickled down, and dashed his mouth; his red tongue lolled out, his mouth was wide open, and his long and white teeth showed with terrible ferocity. He was, indeed, a terrible animal, and I drew a deep breath, as I felt that a struggle was at hand.

Suddenly, when a hundred feet distant, there came the report of another rifle, and the brute halted, and gazed about him. I also cast a wondering look around to see who my new friend was. No one was in sight, yet I saw a faint curl of smoke rising from the bushes above me. The bear also discovered it, and with another growl moved toward it. He had evidently been struck, and his nose was turned in an other direction. Hastily leaving my rifle, I ran up the hill, intending to follow an instant my unknown friend, but both he and the brute had disappeared. I stood anxiously listening for some guiding sound, and soon heard the report of a gun in the distance, followed by a faint

shout. Tearing through the undergrowth, I dashed lastly forward. The trail of the bear was very plain by the blood-marks upon the ground. Soon I reached the spot where a struggle had taken place. The ground was torn up and cast about, and the blood was spattered for many feet around. Following further, I came upon the dead body of the brute. There was another bullet-mark in the back, and a ghastly wound in the throat from which an enormous quantity of blood had poured.

But where was the author of this deed? Why had he fled? Who was he? I looked about expecting to see him near at hand, but was disappointed. On the ground were the marks of a moccasin, and it was evident my preserver was an Indian. This fact suggested other questions. Had he been following me? Else how came he to be present just at the last extremity? And what was his object? It could not be that my life was sought, for, if such were the case, it had been really speeded, as I had been continually exposed through the day, and in the occurrence just narrated, he had preserved my life at the imminent risk of his own.

At any rate, the affair was singular and unaccountable. The Indian was probably gazing upon me this moment, and I looked furtively about, half expecting to see his glowing eyeballs in the thick shrubbery around.

It was now growing late, and I cast about for some place in which to spend the night. The wind still blew, and a fire was indispensable. I gathered several armfuls of twigs and branches, and pitched my camp upon the banks of a small stream, a tributary of the river referred to. Here, after the expense of an almost incredible amount of patience, I succeeded in starting a fire. The pangs of hunger now began to make themselves felt, as I had tasted no food the entire day. The nightingale had a short distance away, and I concluded that he should answer the demands of nature.

As I drew my knife and started toward him, a shadow glided from before me, and I saw a lantern beam steadily made off. I stopped suddenly and hesitated, but finally went on and a piece from the animal, and returned. Just before I reached the crackling fire, I saw a shadow flit before me and disappear. It was too distinct and plain to be a trick of imagination, and it was evident that something or somebody was following or watching. Whoever he might be, I determined that, upon the first opportunity, he should have the contents of my gun for his temerity.

The consciousness that some one was near at hand, was, perhaps, every motion, lessened my appetite somewhat. However, after skewering a good sized piece and broasting it, I made a hearty supper; and, as I probed my insatiable pipe, I think, had it not been for the invisible presence of that invisible form, my enjoyment would have been complete.

The pleasant warmth of the fire, the soothing effect of the pipe, gradually threw a dreamy, half-consciousness over me, into which I sunk with willing delight. As my listless eyes rested upon the glowing embers, there came a strain of wonderful music like the faint tones of a distant wind harp. I started not, but listened, fearing to move lest the spell should be broken. Again came the wave of heavenly harmony, swelling to the most inspiring grandeur and then dying away into faint, far-off murmurs, fainter and fainter, till the strained ear could track their waves. It sounded in the air above me. I knew there was nothing real in my experiences yet I listened breathlessly for it again.

The music continued, I think, over an hour, and, to this day, it seems as if I can still hear it. Such music I have never heard before or since. As I sat alone that dark, stormy night, in the loneliness of the north-west, hundreds of miles from civilization, it seemed there was a chord within me that responded to the air tones above. It appeared sometimes to sink until it had enveloped me in its wild, thrilling power, and I then sat silently swept upward, until I was pained with intense listening. At last, it died away, and with a long sigh of relief I awoke to full consciousness.

I have heard others narrate experiences similar to mine, and I leave the explanation to the cautious and investigating, convinced that I can offer none which will be satisfactory.

I replenished the fire, folded my blanket around me, and lay down to sleep. The night-wind was howling dismally through the forest, and the distant rush of the river made melancholy music. In a short time I fell into a deep sleep.

I was aroused from this by feeling something working at my blanket. I lay motionless a moment to ascertain the character of the threatened danger. The next instant something struck me like the paw of an animal; and, thinking a wolf had attacked me, I sprang to my feet with a shout, threw off my blanket, and drew my knife. Instead of confronting wolves, I met the gaze of a half-dozen savages! For a moment I was completely bewildered.

"You go 'long with us," said one, laying his hand upon my arm.

CHAPTER VIII.

TRAPPING AMONG THE INDIANS.

AFTER I had arisen to my feet, the captors continued conversing in an unknown tongue. It perplexed me to understand how one of them was able to address me in tolerable English. I suppose he must have had intercourse with the traders and hunters and the forts and stations of the North-west.

After a few minutes' conversation, the Indians apparently came to a satisfactory conclusion; for they seated themselves around the fire, ordering me to do the same, and here they sat as grim and silent as statues, not a muscle moving, excepting an occasional wink of the eyes at long intervals. I watched them, it seemed for an hour, shivering with cold all the time although my captors had not deprived me of my blanket.

At last, as I looked up, I saw that day was breaking. There was a faint light in the east, heralding the approach of the sun. Shortly after, it burst above the forest line, lighting up the interminable prairie and wilderness with its golden glow. The savages sprung to their feet, seized their weapons and started away.

"Keep close, and don't run!" said the savage who had addressed me at first.

"No danger of my attempting it," I answered, following almost cheerfully behind them.

And in truth it would have been the height of folly to make an attempt to escape. Each of the savages was a fleet runner, each possessed a loaded rifle, and the utmost limit that I possibly could have gained, as will be evident to the reader, was probably ten feet. No halt was made for breakfast, and during the whole forenoon we tramped through the wilderness in a northerly direction. As I knew I had been in the extreme upper part of the great Nebraska Territory, I felt pretty certain that I was now in the Hudson Bay Territory, within the British line. But here my companions made a turn to the eastward, and then, strangely enough, proceeded south again, so that I was uncertain whether I was now in the United States or not. The reason of this *detour* on the part of the savages I never knew and could only conjecture. I afterward imagined it was for the purpose of misleading and bewildering me in case I should ever attempt to leave them.

When the sun was overhead, the Indians halted upon the bank of a small, flashing stream, and prepared their meal. A half hour before halting, one of the Indians had descended into the forest. Some time after I heard the report of a rifle, and in a few minutes he returned with a large ptarmigan in his hand. The feathers were plucked from this, and the body dressed much after the fashion of civilized communities. It was then partially cooked over the blaze, and despite the change of circumstances, I made as good and substantial a meal upon it as did any of my companions.

The meal finished, the savages splatted before the fire, drew forth their pipes and commenced silently smoking, their eyes glittering through the vapor with suppressed fierceness, as ever and anon a sidelong glance was bestowed upon me. One of the Indians—he who spoke English—was examining my revolver. He closed one eye and peered wonderingly into the

six little barrels; then he fingered about the hammer, took off the cap, tasted it, and replaced it. (It may be remarked here that at the time of my experience, percussion caps were almost unknown in this region. As they were of comparatively recent invention, few of the trappers consented to use them until a long time after.) I was expecting each moment to see the weapon discharge itself, as it was fully charged, and was knocked awkwardly. The Indian looked at it in every direction, and at last gave it up. He took a smell of it, and snuffing the gunpowder, handed it to me.

"What is he?"

"A young gun," I answered with a smile.

As I took the weapon I looked about me. There were five suspicious savages, and there were six messengers of death at my command. For an instant a wild resolve thrilled me; but it was for an instant only. My soul revolted at the wholesale slaughter I should be compelled to inflict, and I looked at my interlocutor with a pleasant smile.

"Does he shoot?" he queried, his dark eyes lighting up with curiosity.

"Of course. Would you like to see me fire it?"

"Yaw! shoot at him," he answered, pointing at the trunk of a large tree.

"What part it?"

"Hit him where you mind to."

"Oh, let's have a mark," I laughed, stepping forward and tearing off a small piece of the bark, so as to offer a red spot several inches in diameter. The other savages were now surveying my motions with interest, and with some degree of suspicion the formidable looking little weapon in my hand. I saw there was an opportunity for making a good impression and I resolved to do it. I stepped back a few paces, took a careful, though apparently a careless aim, and fired the six barrels in succession with tolerably good effect.

"Just look at the mark," I remarked, rather stiffly.

The Indian stepped forward and examined the holes, all within an inch or two of the center. Then with his knife he pried out each bullet, and showed them to his companions. They granted their satisfaction, or rather wonder, and turned the diminutive six shooter over and over in their hands, totally unable to comprehend how such a number of fatal shots could come almost simultaneously from it. I loaded and fired it a number of times, and my friend—he who spoke English—asked me to make him a present of it. I assented with the greatest pleasure, as I had no power to refuse, and volunteered to instruct him in its use, and all things considered we were getting on quite intimate terms.

This proceeding of mine was a stroke of policy, to which I owe my life. My readiness to acquiesce in all their wishes

convinced them that I cherished no vindictiveness, and I am satisfied that, had I asked my captors at this time to allow me to proceed unmolested upon my way, they would have done so. Yet I was willing to tarry with them awhile, for reasons obvious to the reader.

We remained in this spot for over an hour, practicing with the revolver. At the end of that time its new owner had made such progress as to be able to strike a good-sized tree a rod distant, at nearly every shot.

"Him nice thing?" he remarked, showing it in his belt.

"Very good in a close 'log with a bear or too," I replied.

There was but one drawback to the savage's prospect of pleasure. I had but a small quantity of caps, and of course there was no means of obtaining any more of his own kindred. He however satisfied himself with the thought that he could obtain more at some of the trading-posts in that section.

The line of march was again taken up, and continued until midnight. They traveled in Indian file, my dusky friend bringing up the rear, and myself directly in front of him. This plan was adopted, not through any fear of pursuit, as they were in their own country, but because caution and watchfulness are habitual to the North American Indian.

The sun had sunk behind the western mountains, and the deep gloom of night was settling over the wilderness, when, as we reached the top of a swell, I saw for the first time the Indian village. It lay in a sort of valley, and numbered sixty or seventy lodges. As seen in the dim twilight, it looked singularly picturesque. I could see dark forms moving about the lodges, and the low hum of their conversation was audible. We were descried, as our forms stood in relief against the sky, but no signals were given by either party.

As we descended into the valley my heart began to fill me at what I feared my reception would be. Stories of the tortures undergone by captives came over me, and I ventured to express my fears to my friend.

"What your name?" he asked.

"Will," I replied.

"Will, stay here, and me come and fix things. My name Jim," said he, taking the name probably given him by the whites with whom he was acquainted.

The other savages seeing us halting stopped also, and began to say "Jim" as I shall hereafter name him, and something in a language unintelligible to me, and they passed on.

"Stay here, Will, and me fix things."

With this he disappeared, and I sat myself upon the ground to await his return. It struck me as rather curious for him to give a captive such a good opportunity to escape, but it pleased me withal, and it need not be to ~~do~~ ~~make~~ ~~an~~ attempt to make off.

In a few moments he returned, bearing in his arms several Indian garments.

"Will, put him on, and me fix things," said he, throwing them down beside me. I hastily donned them, understanding fully their use and intentions.

"Keep close, and don't say nothing to nobody," he added, as they enveloped my person.

He now turned his face toward the village, and we were seen weaving our way through it. We passed several savages who spoke to me, Jim however taking the responsibility of replying. At last we reached his lodge without my identity being discovered. This was at the extreme eastern end of the village, and as we entered, I saw it was devoid of any persons except ourselves.

"You sleep there, Will," said he, pointing to one corner, where a buffalo robe was visible by the dim light of a few smoldering embers. Thanking him for his kindly offer, I lay down while he replenished the fire, seating himself by it, and commenced the never ceasing pleasure of examining his revolver.

Lying half asleep on the buffalo robe, listlessly gazing at the screen, his features all at once struck me. I had seen them before, but where I could not recollect. Let me see—ah! it was plain now. He was one of the occupants of the mysterious canoe!

It soon became known throughout the village that a captive was among them, and the next morning the entrance of Jim's lodge was thronged with those anxious to get a peep at me. Knowing that this curiosity must be gratified sooner or later, I stepped boldly forth, and mingled among them, in order to have the matter finished at once. No violence was offered me, although several picked my arms rather severely, seemingly determined to be satisfied upon all my points.

My Indian friend Jim was married, and, in the course of the day, his squaw made her appearance.* She was a middle aged woman, and tolerably good looking for a savage. Jim informed her that I was to be her slave, and thus it may be said I was established in winter-quarters.

The heavy storm referred to in the previous chapter, was the close of the warm season, and the fierce northern winter set in. Winter in the north-west is far different from that season in the Middle States. It is but six months in continuance, and such is the intense coldness for the greater part of the season, that the thermometer sinks to thirty and often forty degrees below zero. Two weeks later my capture, it seemed impossible to prevent freezing to death in the lodge, with a burning fire a few feet off. Yet the savages seemed scarcely to heed it. A few extra garments were added to their costume, and they flitted as incessantly through the village as ever.

In the tribe it was acknowledged that I was the property of

Jim, and thus my lot was much more endurable than otherwise. He was really a good hearted Indian; and the course that I ever maintained toward him won his regard. However he was a lazy dog, like all of his male kindred, and it was impossible to discover in him any of those poetical attributes which are so generally conceded to the North American Indian. In conversation with me, he discarded those extravagant, highly-wrought figures of speech common to his kindred, and uttered in their place an awkward oath or two, and a phrase borrowed from the Hudson Bay traders. The greater part of the day he sat before his fire, smoking and gazing moodily into it, while his better half busied herself about the apartment as willingly and contentedly as though she never dreamed of a different life. I assisted her as much as lay within my power, and came at last to do all of the out-door work.

I have always regarded my capture by this tribe of Indians as a fortunate circumstance. I can not imagine how else I could have maintained life through the unusually severe winter which followed. No mortal hand could have saved me from perishing from cold, while it would have been utterly impossible to have procured food, when the snow lay six feet upon the ground, and the rivers were sealed by great depths of ice. Although frequent occasions presented themselves, I determined to make no effort to leave my captors until the spring had arrived.

As mentioned, I had pretty well-defined suspicions that Jim was one of the savages who occupied the mysterious cavern, referred to in the preceding chapters. I was not positive of this, although, when I stood by his side and viewed his person, the resemblance seemed perfect.

One great disappointment had already come. I was sure that I should learn something either of Nat, or of the mysterious captive. When I questioned Jim, he answered with such apparent sincerity, that I was pretty well convinced he knew nothing of either. In regard to the latter he laughed; but he knew nothing of either. Sometimes when I fell into a reverie, and suddenly awoke, I could see Jim lift his eyes quickly from me, as though he had been endeavoring to satisfy himself of my identity. He questioned me artfully, and I told him all. At last, I resolved to put the question direct.

"Jim, didn't you and another warrior, some months ago, pass down the river at the south, with a white woman?"

There was a perceptible start at this question, but he answered promptly:

"Don't know nothing 'bout 'em."

"Why, I am pretty sure that I saw you."

He shook his head. There was nothing to be gained by further questioning, and I gave it up. But I was satisfied he knew more of Nat and the captive than he was willing to tell—and I was not mistaken.

Shortly after this conversation, Jim told me that he and several of his tribe were in the employ of the Hudson Bay Fur Company, and traded numerous furs with them every spring. I asked him whether he was not in the territory of the north-west Fur Company. He replied that that made no difference; each trespassed upon the other's grounds, and he had been engaged for both.*

A few weeks subsequent to this, there came a storm which laid the snow six feet deep, and Jim informed me that, in company with several others, he should proceed to set his traps for the winter's work, and he willingly consented that I should accompany him. Preparations were accordingly made. Extra garments were donned, a couple of traps taken by each, and, placing our snow-shoes upon our feet, we sallied forth. This was the first time I ever attempted to travel with snow-shoes, and, as may be supposed, I made awkward work of it. These were fully six feet in length, resembling a canoe somewhat in shape, and of extreme lightness. The interior is filled with a gauzy net-work, which allows the light, sand-like snow to fall through without impeding one's progress. They are fastened loosely but securely to the feet, and when the snow is not dampened by thaws, twenty miles can be easily made in a day. Without these convenient things it would be next to impossible to travel during six months of the year in the fur-bearing regions.

We proceeded westward some eight or ten miles before all of the traps were set, when, turning, we retraced our steps, intending to visit them the following night. The trap used by the Indians of this section is much the same as the common steel-trap of the States, being, however, much larger, and without the saw-tooth tooth of the latter. A long chain, with a heavy stone attached, is fastened to the trap, and concealed beneath the snow, to prevent the animal making off with the whole concern. The trap is placed just beneath the surface of the snow, and bits of frozen fish are scattered around, which attract the half-starved foxes, lynx, beavers, and wolves in the region. Having completed all arrangements, we retraced our steps, and reached the village just as night was setting in.

Nothing of note took place the next day, and, as the night came on, Jim informed me that they were going to visit their traps to ascertain what luck they had. As he made no objection, I again donned my snow-shoes and joined them. There was but one savage besides him self. The snow was crisp and fine, and the traveling comparatively easy. Jim dragged a small sled

* The Hudson Bay Company, established two hundred years ago, by Prince Rupert, divided its territory into four departments—the Northern, including all the country of the Far North; the Southern, extending south to Lake Superior; the Montreal, including the country along the northern shores of the Gulf of St. Lawrence; and the Columbia Department, comprehending all the country west of the Rocky Mountains, including Oregon in which, I believe, they sell trade.

behind him for the purpose of bringing back any thing found in the traps.

It was a bright moonlight night, and as we journeyed through the forest, there were patches of snow almost as light as day. We shunned the trees, as the snow-crust was brittle around them, and once or twice crossed broad belts of snow, devoid of timber, which Jim informed me were the beds of rivers. As we traveled on, nothing broke the silence, except the muffled sliding of our shoes over the icy crust, or a single word from one of the savages.

The first trap we reached had the *fore leg* of a fox in it. I looked at Jim inquiringly, unable to understand it.

"He gnawed him off, and run away; look out next time."

The fox had been caught by his fore leg, and, finding himself unable to get loose, had eaten off the imprisoned limb and escaped on the others. In a month's time he would probably suffer no inconvenience from it. In the next trap was found a red fox, whose fur bears but a trifling value. He was killed, placed upon the sled, the trap reset, and we proceeded to the rest. None of them had been visited, except the last. In this was imprisoned a beautiful black fox, the capture of which nearly set the two savages into ecstasies. The fur of this animal is more valuable than that of any other caught by the trappers, one alone sometimes bringing as high as two hundred dollars. It is so rarely captured, and such a prize, when taken, that a hunter would be satisfied with one single animal during the whole season.

Our two animals being secured upon our sled, and the traps carefully reset, we commenced our return journey. The night was far advanced when we reached the Indian village. As we entered our lodge, Jim's squaw arose noiselessly and replenished the fire. While removing my snow-shoes, I remarked to Jim that my feet had felt for the last hour or two as though they were asleep.

"Let me see him," he asked quickly, jerking off the thick moccasins which I had donned a few weeks back. He looked at my feet a moment, and exclaimed: "Him froze up!"

I was considerably startled at this, and anxiously asked him if they were badly frozen.

"Yaw, but me fix 'em," he answered, and commenced immediately rubbing until I begged him to desist. He paid no heed to my entreaties, but continued this treatment until he had restored completely the congealed circulation, and saved the useful members.

The savages had but poor fortune in trapping this winter, and there was considerable suffering. The Indians of the north-west rely solely upon what they are able thus to take, for their food during the cold season; and, as there is generally plenty of game, they fare well. But now and then some unaccountable

cause drives all the animals away, and cases of actual starvation have occurred. Jim told me that three winters before a case of cannibalism had occurred in their tribe, and years before that, when a mere child, there came an appalling time. Half the families were obliged to devour some of their members to support life until spring, and, for over a week, an old miserable being supported the whole tribe. Jim said he had more than once cooked his forecousins and eaten them.

The tribe was driven to no such extremity as this while I was with them, and I saw no want myself. Jim was one of their best hunters, and he supplied his own lodge before that of others. Yet, there were others who were not so fortunate, and who were often compelled to endure the pangs of hunger for days at a time. When food was secured, they gorged themselves nearly to bursting, and were the happiest of mortals, until the wants of nature again made themselves felt.

During my captivity, several things occurred to make me suspect that the mysterious captive referred to was in this village the whole time, and I was satisfied that the Indian Jim knew more of Nat than he would impart to me. These imaginings filled me with morbid misgivings, and I made a resolve that as soon as spring came I would make my escape; and if I could learn nothing of the two beings whose fate was unknown to me to depart for the States. The life I was leading was a wearisome, monotonous one, and in time would become unendurable. Spring was but a month or two distant, and in its approach I placed my fondest hopes.

CHAPTER IX.

THE BUFFALO-HUNT AND ITS CONSEQUENCES.

As stated in the last chapter, there was considerable suffering on account of the scarcity of food. The country to the north of Nebraska is the paradise of all species of game in the summer months, but during the winter, the large animals proceed to the southward, and the deep snows prevent the capture of the smaller ones, except by means of traps. Spring, therefore, was looked forward to with eager expectation, as the harbinger of enjoyment and the season of the chase.

And it came at last. First, the sun grew hotter and blazed more fiercely; the snow became damp and cloggy, and the dripping of water could be heard through the day and night. Streams of melted snow poured into the rivers all along the banks, and the ice became weaker and weaker each moment, till, at last, with a terrific crashing and thundering, the whole mass started, and a week after, the clear, blue running water

only was seen. The thaw continued, and with feelings of indescribable joy, we once more saw the face of the earth. Vegetation now commenced with surprising growth, and in an almost incredible short space of time, bright, radiant, glorious spring held indisputable reign. Indians were departing and arriving every day with loads of fish, wild fowl, and game, and the village was a scene of unbridled feasting for many a day.

One forenoon a savage announced that a herd of buffaloes was quietly browsing a few miles to the southward. This produced commotion through the village, and preparations were at once made for the grand hunt. Some twenty or thirty splendid Indian ponies were mounted by as many warriors, and, to my inexpressible delight, Jim informed me that I should accompany them. A small, high-spirited animal was given me. He was of a dark color, and his dappled haunches glistened in the sun like polished ebony.

About noon we sallied forth from the village, and struck a southward direction, restraining our animals to a walk, in order to preserve their wind for the severest trial ahead. Walking along by the side of Jim, the thought of escape—which had not been absent from me for the last six months—came with double force. I was now mounted upon a fleet, long-necked animal, who could hold his own with any horse be trod by the Indians: what was to prevent escape? In the excitement of the chase, I might wander miles away, and be gone many hours, without exciting suspicion. My captors, I suppose, had no thoughts of my attempting a flight, as I had permitted so many opportunities to pass, and I felt there would be no suspicious eyes watching my motions. The prairie stretched hundreds of miles to the southward, and it seemed my animal longed to bound away upon it. I felt the time had come, and resolved never to return to the Indian village a captive.

An hour or so after, we came in sight of the drove, cropping the new grass of the prairie. So numerous were they, that as we looked over them, it was impossible to see their extent. Far away, until they touched the horizon, the ocean of dark, swarming bodies could be seen.

Our animals now partook of the excitement of their masters. Arching their necks, they scented the prey afar, and it was nearly impossible to restrain their impetuosity. They snorted, plucked, clamped their bits, shook their heads, and seemed determined to rush forward despite all restraint.

We continued stealthily approaching in a body, preserving strict silence, in order not to alarm the game. In this way, we came within a hundred yards, when a bull raised his alarmed gaze at us, and, giving a loud snort, heaved his huge body round and plunged madly into the herd. All took the alarm, and went thundering away, making the earth tremble with their multitudinous tread.

It was now wholly useless to undertake to check our animals longer, and setting up a wild yell, the Indians plunged after them. The buffalo is not a runner, and, owing to the shortness of his fore legs, appears to roll in his gait. The Indians' horses soon being then in files alongside the bisons, and, as soon as the shot is given, they shy off to avoid the infuriated animals' horns. But as I was prepared for it, my animal was abreast of a crowd, and waiting for my shot. Here I committed a blunder common to all beginners of the hunt. I fired while holding the reins in my hand. The consequence was, my bullet hit the animal about the head, got entangled in his mane, and he would drop out in a day or two. My horse immediately veered to one side, and allowed the buffalo to run until I could control him. I now saw my beast knew more of the chase than I did, and dropping the rein upon his neck, allowed him full freedom.

Quickly, but rapidly, he came alongside the plunging buffalo, and taking more care, I sent a bullet through the fore part of his body. It was his death-wound; and, seemingly conscious of his fate, and determined on revenge, he wheeled in a circle, drove his fore feet into the ground, and dropped his head to nip up my charger. This movement was so sudden and he was so close upon him, that my horse could neither stop nor turn to one side. But he avoided him for a moment. Dropping upon his haunches with a snort, he made a spring upward, and went clean over the buffalo. The infuriated animal expected this, and struck his horns upward, expecting to kill him. The instinct of the horse was too true, however; he, too, feared such a fate, and leaped high to avoid the horns. As he came to the earth again, he found himself near the enraged buffalo in full pursuit; but he was not close enough to him, wheeling and dodging, and still looking back over his shoulder for me to give my shot. My gun was empty, and before I could charge it, the buffalo had fallen to the ground, and was fast dying.

I now looked about me. Buffaloes were flying in every direction, and the forms of the savages could be seen darting to and fro among them, dealing destruction at every turn. The wind now was pouring simultaneously southward, while the savages, who had been cut off, were endeavoring to rejoin them, and were working along with them. In different parts of the prairie I now saw the dark, motionless forms of the slain buffaloes, and was now satisfied the chase had been thus far.

The sky, which in the morning was fair and clear, was now becoming overcast, and two or three warning rumbles of thunder were heard in the distance. Still, the savages were too excited to notice the intimation, as long as a single buffalo remained. I saw Jim plunge his horse unhesitatingly into a crowd of a dozen or so, when, as he commenced dealing

destruction, his horse became entangled, and he was compelled to make a flying leap over the backs of the animals around him. This he accomplished successfully, leaping from one back to the other, until he was clear of them all.

Suddenly, it occurred to me, while holding my fiery horse, that if I meditated escape it was high time to be about it. Turning to the southward, I could just descrie the drove then, leaving away, a vast cloud of dust circling above them. The rain was dropped upon the neck of my horse, and, stretching out his head, he bounded away like the wind. He was a noble animal, and was now in his element. He enjoyed the chase as much as any of the savages; and, as mile after mile of prairie flew beneath his feet, he was only warming into the excitement. As I looked back, I could just discern the Indians, like specks in the distance, still at their bloody work.

We were now at no great distance from the herd, and my horse, catching sight of an old worried bull, somewhat in the rear, instantly made toward him. He was too jaded to hasten his pace, and I could see his fury was roused. I prepared to shoot him, as it would go to show my pursuers, if I should have any, that the excitement of the chase had alone carried me away. While yet some distance, he shied to one side, and turned his head warningly toward us, but without backing. The horse, however, finding that I still restrained my shot, continued to bring me closer. At last, the lion struck into a swifter run, and made desperate efforts to rejoin his companions. In an instant I was beside him, and holding my gun to my shoulder, was just on the point of firing, when he suddenly stood at bay, in precisely the same manner as the other. My horse, instead of making a running leap this time, stopped instantaneously, planting his feet firmly in the ground. I was not prepared for this, and shot a dozen feet over his head, falling upon my face within a foot of the buffalo. The shock was terrible, and I was severely injured. I endeavored to rise, fearing that I should be gored and trampled to death, but was unable, and heard the buffalo snuffing away. I placed my hand to my face, and found it covered with blood, and a strange low lamentation was coming over me. I rose to my knees, and gazed about me. The buffalo was plunging in the rear of his drove, where my horse was galloping wildly around me, his mane and tail flying in the wind. I heard the hoarsest of maddened utterances, and every thing was growing dark and confused. I tried again to rise, but failed. There was a thick darkness about me, a heavy hand pressing me to the earth, and all became chaotic.

When consciousness returned, all was black darkness. The rain was pouring down in torrents, and, stammered and bleeding, I lay on the soaked, cold, spongy earth. Gradually, the remembrance of my misfortune came over me. I must have been

lying several hours upon the prairie, exposed to the cold, dismal storm. My clothes were saturated with the chilling rain, and my face and hands bedabbled with mud and dirt.

I struggled desperately to my feet, and endeavored to pierce the surrounding gloom around; but it was useless; not the smallest point of the faintest light could be seen in any direction. Up, down, on every hand, the same solid walls of darkness enveloped me. I was many miles from the Indian village, and I lost its direction. At that moment, I would have given anything to have been within Jim's lodge. Flight, in my present condition, was not to be thought of, and I must soon receive succor or I should perish.

I listened. In the dismal sweep of the rain something like a footstep was heard. I called out, but there was no reply. Again the splash of a foot was heard, now from a different point. Soon I discovered some animal was walking around me in a circle. Feeling round in the spongy prairie, I found my rifle, but it was useless as a means of defense, as the charge was so completely wetted. I clubbed it, and waited for the attack. Round and around the same step went. At first I fondly hoped it might be Jim, or one of his companions, but its foot-
steps showed it to be a quadruped, and its approach was too cautious. Suddenly it halted and walked directly toward me. I drew my rifle back, ready to brain it the minute it was within my reach. A faint neigh was heard—joy inexpressible! it was my faithful horse. As I called to him, he approached, and lowered his head for me to take his bridle. With a feeling of deep thankfulness and hope, I clambered into the saddle, and he bounded away, his unerring instinct leading him straight toward home.

The rain continued to beat, cold and dismal, and I felt all ready bearing within me a hot, fiery fever, from the terrible suffering I had undergone. I should soon be prostrate, and without some kindly hand to nurse me, would inevitably perish. But the horse was certain; and, after an hour or two, my heart leaped as we entered the silent Indian village. But one light was burning, and that was in the lodge of Jim, showing that he expected my return. I rode instantly up to the entrance and dismounted, while my noble horse made off to look out for himself. Jim arose as he heard my approach, and, without a word, advanced to meet me.

"You had long been gone—"

He started back in horror at my appearance. Then, holding his hand over his head, and pointing at me, he asked:

"What do matter? Been in fight?"

"No, I was thrown from my horse, and lay senseless upon the prairie until a short time ago. I feel bad, Jim, and fear I am severely injured," said I, starting to seat myself.

"Wait minute; am hurt; let me fix 'em."

He clapped his hands, and instantly the bundle of blankets at the side of the lodge arose to an upright position, and his squaw walked forth. My wounds were now dressed, my garments changed for dry ones, and with a hot cup of drink, I was swathed in blankets, and placed by the fire. Jim said it was not far from morning, and if at that time I was worse, he would call in the Medicine Man.

All night the fever burned and raged, and when morning came I was partially delirious. Jim examined my pulse, shook his head doubtfully, and departed from the lodge. In a short time he returned, and with him came the Medicine Man, an Indian considerably advanced in years, and much loved and honored by his tribe. He, too, looked grave, and held a consultation in an undertone with Jim. From these signs, I knew I was dangerously, probably fatally, injured.

And now came days of those strange, indescribable visions that come over one in high fever. I was in all imaginable places, and saw wonderful persons and scenes. Now and then, there were moments when reason flitted to its throne. At such times I saw the Medicine Man or Jim near me; and once, as I wonderingly opened my eyes, I saw the mysterious captive looking over me. I looked straight into her dark, liquid eyes, and reached forth and touched her garment, to satisfy myself that it was no freak of mind. My fixed stare alarmed her, and she looked inquiringly at the Medicine Man. He nodded something, and she departed.

About a week after my accident, as I subsequently learned, I awoke with my full reason. As I looked wonderingly about me, the first object that encountered my eyes was the captive to whom I have alluded. My fixed stare at her seemed to alarm her, and she arose to pass out.

"Wait," said I; "pray do not leave me."

"But you must not talk," she replied, much agitated. "the Medicine Man will not allow it; you will injure yourself."

"You and the Medicine Man are both mistaken. I know I have been sick and delirious, but my mind was never clearer than it is this instant. I know a few moments' conversation can not injure me. Let me beg you not to refuse me, as I can not tell whether the opportunity will ever again be offered."

The young woman before me was much embarrassed, and for a moment, hesitated, seemingly in doubt between duty and inclination. Seizing the opportunity, I urged my wish with greater fervor than ever. Finally she glowed faintly, as though she expected to meet the twinkling eyes of the Medicine Man, and then answered:

"I can not refuse your request, and yet it seems wrong that I should thus disobey the injunctions that were given for your good. What is it that you wish to ask me?"

"Am I out of danger?"

"Not yet. You have been crazy for a long time, and more than once the Medicine Man has shaken his head in doubt when he looked upon you."

"Have you not watched by me nearly all the the time I have been here?" I gazed full in her face as I uttered this question, and she dropped her eyes in confusion, as she replied:

"I have assisted the Medicine Man several times as he wished me to, and I have done no more to you than I would to any one in similar circumstances."

"No, sweet lady, I know you haven't," I exclaimed, in astonishment; "your heart is open to any one. Who you are I know not, but I can see your race is similar to my own, and judge you to be a willing prisoner among these Indians. Your hair has long been before me, and I can never forget your fair, angelic face. What first was merely a dream, has grown into a strong passion for you, though I fear—"

I paused as she suddenly arose to her feet, and raised her hand in a warning manner. Before I could ask the meaning of this, a loud clasp was heard, and the next minute the Medicine Man made his appearance. He gesticulated angrily toward her, and she passed quietly out of the lodge. I followed her with my eyes, and as she reached the passage-way, she turned toward me with a look that told more than words.

The Medicine Man evidently suspected what I had been doing; I could see he was excited, and mumbled continually to himself. He forced a bitter, scalding drink to my lips, which was soothing in its effects, and in a short time I slept.

Now comes a long blank in my memory. After this incident, black night shut around my mind. There is a faint recollection of again seeing Jim and the Medicine Man bending over me, and the sweet pale face of the fair captive, and then again came utter oblivion.

CHAPTER X.

AN AWFUL AWAKENING.

I HAVE now reached a point in my life over which I would fain pass in silence. It is an experience so strange, so like some horrid vision of sleep, so different from what usually passes the lot of man, that, at this remote day, I cannot look upon it without a shudder and a shiver of horror. I have sometimes persuaded myself that it was unreal; but no, it is true, and time can never efface the memory of it in a different dress than that of unearthly terror. Dread and hate it stands alone, in my checkered lot, and the silver that now glistens prematurely in my hair, came upon that night.

I remember falling into a deep sleep, in which the last form that passed before my eyes was that of the dark Medicine Man: there was a confused murmur of voices, and then all became dark. Gradually the darkness was swept by the glittering light of a dream—a dream which had little form or theme, but the minutest particulars of which I remember to this day. There were airy, waving figures gliding silently about me, without voice, but with every variety of motion. They passed and repassed before my face, frequently passing and extending their arms over my body, and sometimes standing and intently scanning my countenance. This continued a long time, not a word spoken either by myself or the forms, when suddenly the whole changed. The waving figures darted with the rapidity of lightning among each other, and the quiet radiance became instantly as black as night. In this, I could distinguish the rushing forms growing fainter and fainter, until at last, all was blackness again.

Then came a feeling as though the thick darkness in one volume were gradually crushing me beneath it, and then a strange feeling of being cramped and held forcibly still. Then came a long, deep, indrawn breath, and I awoke.

All was confused and inexplicable. Open my eyes as wide as I might, I could not pierce the Stygian gloom. I tried to move, but could not—could not stir a limb, and only the fingers of my hand. The air was steamy and hot, and I was surrounded by something which choked every part. I strove to collect my thoughts. I remembered the consultation in the tent, the coming unconsciousness, and my present awakening. My first impression, after this, was that the house had fallen over me. I clenched my hands—*they closed upon earth!* I reached forward and licked the darkness. *I tasted earth!*—and then came the sudden, overwhelming knowledge—

I WAS BURIED ALIVE!!

No pen can draw the faintest picture, no soul can conceive the unutterable horror, unless that soul has gone through the same awful experience, that filled my soul at that discovery. Such a whirlwind of fire as seethed through my bursting brain, such a perfect blaze of all the passions that can rock the human mind, I can not portray with this feeble pen. For a moment I was frantic, and then suddenly a dreadful and frightful calmness soothed my frame.

Ay, I was buried alive! The swaves had mistaken my trance-like stupor for death itself, and I had been hurried prematurely into the grave.

Oh, the appalling discovery! To die while in the grave! The thought was too horrible! I was not yet ready to give way to utter despair. I dared not pause a second for thought, for I knew it would surely come. I twisted and struggled with the strength of fury. I could turn my body around, and use my arms. There was an open space before my face, as I had been

buried in the sitting position. Had I lain back I could not have survived five minutes; as it was my limbs were immovably secured, and it was absolutely impossible for me to free myself.

It was a long time, for such an experience, before I admitted this, but I was compelled to at last. Death by suffocation was rapidly approaching, and all that was left for me was to prepare for it. The small breath of air around me had already been breathed over and over again, and was becoming hot, steamy, and sickening. I was gasping and panting, but strove to collect my thoughts and keep them from wandering. I commenced praying.

Suddenly a muffled sound reached my ear, as though something had fallen to the earth above. I listened—it was repeated directly over me, now rapidly and regularly. What could it mean? Was it the sign of dissolution, or was it real? I listened, and heard it plainer and plainer above the mild throbs of my heart. *It was real!* Something or somebody was digging at the grave above!

Could I now hold out till I was reached? The air had already become *thick and palpable*, and strange fires were flitting before my eyes. I held my breath till the distended blood-vessels seemed bursting, and then as I respired, the earth turned to *soft mud* around me; and then the long labored inspiration was like drawing in some loathsome reptile.

But *what* was above? It could not be a person, as I had been buried by them. It must be a famished animal hastening to devour me. Yet this would be a relief, to gain one more draught of the sweet, cool air of heaven before death.

Now I heard the murmur of voices! I shouted—there was a pause and stillness; then the efforts were renewed with greater vigor. I shouted again. I could feel the jarring trembling of the loose earth above. Some one was endeavoring to rescue me from my awful fate, thank God!

A moment after, and the cool air brushed my face; a strong hand seized my arm, and—oh, joy inexpressible! I was on the earth again.

For a moment I was bewildered and dizzy, and my pulse beat wildly, for I had been very near death. I was recalled to full consciousness by the familiar voice of Jim.

"Get in a tight fix, Will. Ole Jim jus' in time."

I took the savage's hand without a word, and sinking upon my knees, sent up a deep, heartfelt prayer to the Merciful Being who had thus snatched me from the most appalling death. There was a bright moon shining, and, as I turned, I saw the dark Indian's eyes fixed wonderingly upon me.

"Jim," said I, solemnly, "may the God who has put it into your heart, reward you for this act. I *never, never* can."

"Jim didn't do it," he quickly interrupted. "*She* did!" and disengaging his grasp, he darted out of sight. I turned and

looked behind her. I was, standing motionless as a statue, her slight form wrapped in a thick mantle, her sweet, white face appearing like a spotless snowball the fair, mysterious captive.*

"I am not dead," I was disposed to reply, "it was a spirit before me, so still and motionless she remained. So why she turned to depart."

"Hold!" cried I, springing forward and seizing her arm. "Wait on me now, till I thank thee."

"Thank the Great One above," she replied, in a low, sweet voice. "He it is who has preserved your life."

As she uttered these words, she turned her dark eyes upward, and the moonlight streaming down upon her face, threw a veil like a halo of glory around it. Then looking me calmly in the face, she added:

"You have escaped an awful death, it is true; and you are not the only one who has thus risen from the grave. When he-
lows you speak of home and of friends there, and I know your presence is prayed for. The chance of reaching them is now placed within your reach. A horse is saddled and bridled, and awaiting you, but a short distance away. Jim will furnish you with a rifle. You know the direction to take, and let me urge you to flee."

As she turned to go, but I restrained her.

"You are a willing person, and do you wish to live and die with these savages?"

Her tears glided on her face as she replied: "I have not a friend in the civilized world. My parents were murdered by the Indians, and myself and sister carried away in captivity. We were separated; I was taken eastward, and she westward beyond the Rocky Mountains. She can not be living, for she was a delicate child, younger than me, and incapable of bearing one half the suffering that must have been imposed upon her. Should I ever see the land I left when a child, I should be a stranger among strangers. There are those here who love me. I will remain and comfort them."

"Hear with me," I earnestly urged. "You will not be a stranger. He who has saved you, and you can live with your own kind here. Jim, who is faithful to you, will furnish us both with a fine horse, and we can chase all perils. I—"

I paused, for her agitation had become painful. She was sitting to the earth, when I caught her hand, holding her a short distance, and myself resting my head upon a fallen tree. Then I gently placed her hand over on my breast, and looked down upon her features. Her greatly heaved bosom was removed, and her white hands lay across the lines of jetty hair like a jeweled net.

* In the north-west a part of the Indians of the coast called the *rooks*, who have their seat as soon as the *Manich* or *Man* pronounce them beyond recovery. This horrid practice is not confined to the *rooks*, for other tribes in the North-west have been known to inflict it upon their captives.

in darkness. The dark, sweeping lashes, the faint rosy tinge of each cheek, the delicate nose and lips, as the moon light rested on them, were indescribably beautiful. There was, too, a tremulous throbbing that showed what a powerful emotion was agitating her.

What was that emotion? Was it a response to my own great passion? What else could it be? Encouraged by the correlation that the latter was the case, I urged my suit with renewed ardor. I pictured the happiness that would be hers in a civilized country, and the utter misery that must follow her among the savages. She informed me that she was a captive, and that the tribe near at hand, but of one father north, which had held her ever since the massacre of her parents; and that should I be told, in case she attempted to leave them, as an traitor would be the result. I saw she wished—she longed to go, and the objections she offered were only suggested by her fears.

"Hush!" she whispered. "There is some one."

I turned. Jim stood beside me.

"How soon goin'?" he asked, anxiously, turning to me.

"Shortly; why do you ask?"

"Day comin', and if you git cotched, no use!" he replied, meaningly.

"I was not aware, Jim, that I had enemies among you."

"You hain't; but—"

The rest of the sentence was gesticulated, first pointing to me and the fair one beside me.

"Do you not understand?" asked the latter. "There are several in the tribe who look upon me with envious eyes, and were they conscious that you knew of my existence, you would not be spared a moment. This is what Jim means, and his words must be heeded."

"Must I travel about and alone?" I asked of the Indian.

"There's less what tossed you over boarder," he answered, pointing to a clump of trees, "and I've brought your other things," he added, handing me my knife, pouch, robe, and rifle, "and I'll show through woods to people."

"Thank you, but I shall not need you, as I know the way well enough."

"How soon you goin' to start?" he asked, turning to depart.

"In less than an hour I shall bid you farewell."

"Jim," interposed the fair captive, "let me go horse to the stable with you. I think I shall also accept of your protection. If you will, you can tell them that I shall be with you in a few days' time. As I know the wilderness well, I will make out my way through it."

The latter looked at the party with surprise. If he was shrewd enough to suspect the truth, he was also polite enough not to show it. He replied that her wish should be gratified, and he

disappeared as noiselessly as he came. It was now getting far in the night. The moon rode high in the heavens, and shed a full, perfect light down upon us.

"So you are going," said I, looking at her.

"I am going to attempt it," she answered, firmly.

"And through no action of mine shall you ever regret this step," I added, warmly.

"Oh! I hope he will soon return, for I wish to go," she said, as with a shiver of apprehension she looked hither and yonder in the dark shadows of the forest.

"As yet we know not each other's names," said I, pleasantly.

"True," she answered, with a faint smile. "Mine is Imogene Merment."

"And mine is William Belmont; but where can Jim be?"

"Ah! there he is now," she answered, with a deep flash, and the next minute the savage stood beside us.

"The animals there; you'd better be off. Soon as you get away, I'll cover up hole, but I'm afeard there are some peckin' about here."

"We will go at once," said Imogene, gathering up her dress.

I turned to give a last word to Jim, but he had vanished.

"Let us hurry," said she, "for I have a dread that we are watched, and will not get away after all. I pray God that nothing may prevent us, now that we are started."

She almost ran. In a minute we reached the grove. Here we found two horses ready for a journey. Without losing a moment, we mounted and struck to the northward.

"Why this direction, Imogene?" I asked.

"To avoid pursuit," she answered. "At daylight we will change it, and proceed to the south-east."

The open prairie was some miles distant, and as long as we were in the deep shadows of the wood, the greatest danger was to be apprehended. It was more than probable that the extended absence of Jim and Imogene, at the same time, had aroused the suspicions of more than one savage. As all must have known that I was but a while still living, and that she had battled their determination as long as there was hope, when the morning came and I showed her abrupt departure, they could not help suspecting the true cause.

The air was cool and exhilarating, and, as my fiery steed pranced beside that of Imogene, I could not restrain the wild, ardent hopes that thrilled my being. I was but a wayward child with the fairest prize in the universe to me. What else could be needed? Ah! there was the fate of Ned, my companion, still shrouded in obscurity. I determined to question her at once in regard to him.

"Imogene, although this is hardly the proper moment, I can not help questioning you about the fate of a friend."

"I know to whom you refer," she answered, quickly. "I

have heard him speak of you, but he does not know of your existence. He is a captive like yourself, save that he seems perfectly contented with his fate."

"Thank heaven! it seems indeed that a wonderful Providence is watching over all of us."

"I believe he can effect his escape, but it must be through your instrumentality, for I will not dare to show myself."

"Good, clever Nat, I will do any thing for him," I exclaimed, warmly. "He is a whole-souled fellow, for all he is so odd. Only to think, he has been so high me all this time! It is my place to assist him, as far as lies in my power."

"I have had several conversations with him, in all of which he spoke of you. He appeared to love you, and regretted greatly that you were so reckless. He said he had long striven to teach you to hunt with caution, but never succeeded. He also referred to a trapper named Bill Bidlon, the one who did his best to save our family when they fell victims to the savages, and whom I would give all the world to see. He said he succeeded, after several years, in making quite a hunter of him."

"Oh! the rascal," I laughed, "just like him."

When day dawned we continued our journey for several hours. I learned in the course of the conversation that Imogene Mement wandered continually among the tribes for many miles around, and, as I learned in after years, her existence was known to points as far opposite as Fort Churchill and Fort Hall.*

At noon I shot a prairie hen, which was cooked and upon which we made a hearty dinner. Imogene ascended a small eminence to ascertain whether any signs of pursuit were visible. None were discovered, but we hurried forward until nightfall, when we drew up for the night. We started a fire, and at my urgent request, Imogene lay down beside it, while I kept watch. Our horses were pitched at scarcely a trot, and yet in the night they became so terrified at the approach of some animal that they broke loose and fled, and we never saw them again.

This was a great loss to us, but in the morning we continued our journey on foot, and at noon ascended a high mountain, which was a spur of the Black Hills, lying between the Yellowstone and Missouri. The day was a clear, beautiful one, and the forest peaks of the mountains, rising up against the blue, cloudless horizon, formed a fine background to the glorious landscape spread out before us. Never shall I forget the magnificent scene which was opened to our vision. To the north, the rocky wilderness stretched in one unbroken tract as far as the eye could reach, while to the southward, the glistening waters of

* The Crow Indians are numerous tribes, subdivided into the Blackfeet, Flat-top, Blackfoot, One-pa-pa, Two-knee, and Minnetonka, besides several others. Each has its separate village and chief, but all are on friendly relations with each other.

appearance. Soon a large canoe, nearly full of men came to view around a bend some hundred yards distant. It was followed by another and another, all keeping time to the words of their song;

We are going with the tide,
Yoho! yoho!
Free as the mountain-winds we glide,
Yoho! yoho!
Oh! ours is a merry life,
And full of danger, toil, and strife,
Then join your voices
In the glad refrain,
And let the mountains
Echo back the strain.
Yoho! yoho!

As over a score of majestic voices joined in the chorus, the echoes were awakened for miles around. I watched them in wonder and admiration. Soon, to my surprise, they made toward the shore where I stood. As it was noon, they were probably getting in for their dinner. In a moment the boats were beached up on the bank, and, as rough and hardy a set of fellows as ever met, sprung upon the shore. A large fire was soon blazing and roasting an enormous quantity of meat steaming and sizzling, and the men, excepting the cook, were lolled about on the grass, each one smoking and chatting, and making a scene of pleasant confusion and enjoyment.

I now stepped forth from my concealment. Several turned their faces toward me as I passed them, but no unusual amount of astonishment was manifested. I made my way to a group of them, and asked myself if I could talk to them.

"Where'd you come from?" asked a short, gruff-looking man.

"No place in particular, at present," I replied, pleasantly.

"One of them Northwest chaps, I s'pose?"

"No sir, I am no trader, but a mere adventurer."

"Tell that to them as believes it," he retorted, angrily.

"It is immaterial whether you believe it or not. If I were a member of the Northwest Fur Company, I should not be ashamed or afraid to own it, as I believe that is as respectable and honorable as the one in whose service you are."

"How do you hear that?" called out the fellow. "Yer's one of them Northwesters, a Northwest, and he's insulted us—"

"I don't know him."

"Do you hear that, I say?" he called out, without regarding my answer. "Here's a sneaking Northwest crackling up his party afore us."

I was provoked but made no reply. His words attracted attention, and, anxious to see the trouble, all gathered round.

"What's up?" demanded a stumpy fellow, pushing his head in between the others.

"A fight! a fight!"

"Make a ring for em."

"Blow me, if he don't look like one o' them Nor'westers as sent Governor Semple out the world.* Go in, Tom!"

"I'll maul him as soon as I get in fightin' order," said Tom—he of my first acquaintance.

Matters were now getting serious. A collision between the redoubtable Tom and myself seemed unavoidable. His impudent bravado and insults had roused me somewhat, and I made up my mind that I should withdraw nothing I had uttered, and bear none of his insolence.

"What's the row?" demanded another; "I don't understand it."

"Why here's a sneakin' Nor'wester," answered Tom, "blowin' hard things, and I've made up my mind I won't stand it;" and he continued his warlike preparations.

"That's right, Tom, go in and win," added several voices.

"Gentlemen," said I, all I ask is that you shall understand this matter, and show fair play—"

"We'll do that, you?" interrupted several.

"In the first place," I continued, "I have said nothing against the company in whose service you are. This man, whom you call Tom, accused me of being a member of a rival company; I replied I was not, although I should not be ashamed if such were the case. He avers, however, I have insulted him, and seems determined to avenge it, and I am perfectly willing to gratify him. As I said, I am not in the service of any company, but am a mere adventurer in these parts. With this explanation I am now ready for any proceeding he may wish."

"Smash me to nuthin', ram me down and shoot me, if that ain't Jarsey, or I'm a sinner!" exclaimed a familiar voice, and the same instant Bill Biddon stepped into the ring before me.

"Give us your paw, Jarsey."

He grasped my hand, while his scarred countenance was dissolved in one great, broad smile. It is needless to say I was delighted beyond measure at this unexpected meeting.

"Why, Bill, I little thought to meet you here."

"And yer's as what thinks Bill didn't think so himself?"

The others stood wondering. The old trapper turned, and seeing Tom standing with his fists still clinched, shouted:

"If you say another word to that gentleman, 's is worth forty dollars to you, there'd be only a grease spot left of you. Do you hear?" and he shook his ponderous fist beneath his nose.

"Now I hear, and with a mighty 'I's' to boot," I shouted, clapping his coat with the most perfect coolness.

"Now," said Biddon, facing the rest, "if that ain't my paw!"

* It was an affair between two parties, both equally responsible to the stockholders of the North-west Fur Company, the latter of the former. Mr. Semple was shot by a member of the latter. The supposed cause of the feud was the duty of our story, but for a long time there was an acrimony and frequent quarrels between the two companies.

yet as wants to take up this boat, why jist step forward and I'll settle the matter with him."

"Is he a Nor'wester?" asked one, breaking the silence.

"What you want to know fur?"

"Cause if he is, he can't pass this crowd without swallowin' them words."

"What words?" demanded Biddon, fiercely.

"What Tom said he said."

"Have I not explained?" I commenced.

"Now jist hold on, Jarsey," interrupted the trapper, turning toward me with a backward wave of his hand. "Now, hold on, you, fer ef you take back any thing you've said, shoot me, ef I don't lick you. Ouh!" Then turning to the others, he continued, "He ain't goin' to take back nothin' he's said yer-est; and ef Tom Wilson thar' don't swallow what he said yer's as will make him do it."

"I thought've he mistaken," said the now thoroughly-frightened Tom.

"That won't do."

"Wal, he didn't say so," he jerked out.

"That'll answer. 'Sposen I say he is a Nor'wester, how 'bout that?" demanded Biddon, glaring about on the rest.

There was no response. All was still as death.

"Wal, boys," aimed Bill, returning to his good nature, "he ain't a trapper; never took a skin in his born days; is a perfect gentleman, and I'll make you 'quainted with Bill Belmond, from the States, or, as I call him, Jarsey, as fine a chap as ever tramped these parts."

The scene that followed was singular and amusing. All crowded around me, smiling and talking and shaking hands; and the first hand I grasped was Tom Wilson's.

"Hope you won't mind what I said," he spoke in a lower tone. "I ort'er been lammed for it, sure."

"Don't refer to it," I laughed; "I suppose you were only sayin' as for a little amusement to pass away time."

"That's it 'zactly, Jarsey, you're a trump."

"It's my private opine," called out Biddon, "that this corn is goin' inter those catables, and ef you wants a bite, Jarsey, you'd better jine."

All now crowded around the meal pot, and commenced devouring its contents with the avidity of wild animals. It consisted mainly of pemmican (dried buffalo-flesh), a food much in vogue in the North-west, with several biscuits and some scalding tea. The meal finished, the men instantly produced their pipes, which they indulged in for ten or fifteen minutes. The boats were then shoved into the water, the cooking-utensils brought on board, and preparations made for starting.

"Whar' you bound to?" asked Biddon, just as they were ready.

"The Blackfoot Sioux," I answered, unable to repress a smile.

"The Blackfoot-Sioux?" he repeated.

"Yes; do you know their grounds?"

"It's 'bout twenty miles down stream—that is, the village. We can't go to camp thereabouts to-night. What, in the name of heaven, do you want with them?"

"I'll explain matters when we have a better opportunity," I answered.

"Jump in with me, then, an' I'll get Tom Wilson to rest a while, an' we'll talk over matters and things."

I sprung into the boat, and the brigade was soon under way. The Yellowstone, being broad and deep and the current quite powerful, the work was light. The song was again taken up by the voyageurs, all joining in the chorus and keeping time with the measured dip of their paddles. I seated myself in the stern, beside the steersman, whom I found to be a clerk in the Hudson Bay Company, and a gentleman.

"How long will you remain with us, Mr. Richmond?"

"Only until night."

"I hoped you would accompany us to the settlement."

"I should be glad to do so, but circumstances forbid."

"It was quite fortunate," he smiled, "that you and Bidlon were acquainted. He is a noble fellow."

"Most assuredly he is. I accompanied him, as a seeker of adventures, last summer from Independence, and we separated in the autumn, while in the wilderness. I was considerably surprised to find him in your service."

"He had a dispute with one of his employer's agents, and gave him a severe punishment. He was reported rather sharply and left the company in disgust. This was during the winter. Shortly after he visited Red River settlement, and volunteered his services, and they were gladly accepted."

"He has been then but a short time with you."

"Only a few weeks—but long enough to let us know the value of his services. This brigade is all owing to him."

"How so?"

"You are aware we are now in the United States territory. It is not often that we extend our work into it, except in Oregon, which has lately fallen into the hands of the Americans. Bidlon had engaged a large quantity of furs of the Indians in the neighborhood, intending to turn them over to their companies, but after his dispute he offered them to us, and this brigade was dispatched for them. He will send quite a pile of money due him at York Fort when he arrives there."

Further time was spent in conversation with the clerk, when I noticed a person had taken Bidlon's place at the oars. The trapper motioned me beside him. Seating ourselves in the opposite end of the boat, he said:

"Now we'll have a talk, Jarsey, old?"

"The first thing to be knowed," said Biddon, "is how in the name of human natur' you come in these parts. How war' it, Jarsey?"

"You must remember, Biddon, I've been a prisoner for the last six months," and, thereupon I told my story.

"Did you ever hear nothin' of Greasy?"

"Yes; a rumor reached me that he was living with a tribe of Indians to the east of us."

"Along shore impossible," answered the trapper, with a shake of his head.

"Why is it impossible?"

"He's had his hair raised, sure, and I never see'd the next day after we see'd the last on him."

"I am more hopeful than you are. Recollect, I have been a captive and am now here without losin' my hair."

"It's queer, I allow, how you come out as you did. The re is in them parts are rampin' Indians, and if it hadn't been for that Jan, and that gal, you'd a' gone under, sure. It's tuck once by them same chaps. Me an' Snapper Jack was sot on one dark night in an awful snow storm by a hundred on 'em. They loaded right at us, and Jack rolled over with a point of lead in him and never said a word. It's party well riddled in my lower story, but I got off with my hair, while Jack never knowed who took his. They exulted on teasin' you up brown, and would of it want for that gal."

The halibut proceeded to gallop and rapidly down the Yellowstone, until the sun sinking in the west, warned them that night was at hand. The stagsman informed us they should not be able to reach the Indian village that night, but would, early the next day. Just as the shadows were blending with the darkness on the river banks, the halibut ran in to shore for the night's encampment. A dense forest on either side of us, rendered our situation gloomy; but this was soon dispelled by the jolly rumpuses. Fuel was collected, and three fires crackled and blazed cheerily around us. The men passing to and fro, chatting and joking, the confusion of preparations for supper, made a scene well calculated to dispel all gloom. All gathered around the busy evening meal. These halibut fellows, after the laborious day's work, their appetites sharpened,

"Up the horses, when you hear them coo."

The next morning, the halibut and the party were in requisition. The halibut loaded men in teams and trapped and hunted the shores of the frozen sea to the plains of the Kansas, and from Labrador to the mouth of the Columbia, beyond the Rocky Mountains. They had encountered every imaginable foe; the intense cold and the polar bear of the far North, and the innumerable hordes of savages of the more temperate regions; and now

they recounted their reminiscences, and speculated upon the furs still in store for them. The hours passed rapidly, and, ere I was aware, the *voyageurs* were gathering their blankets around them for the night's rest.

"Come, bundle up, Jarsey," said Bidlon, "for there'll be no time to snooze in the daylight."

The men were stretched at every point around the fire, their feet being toward it, the heads radiating outward, so that the three groups resembled the same number of immense wheels. As most of the places were occupied, I lay a little beyond the circle, within a foot or two of Bidlon. The fires now smoldered, and the heavy darkness again settled over wood and river. Nothing disturbed the deep silence save the faint howl of the Yellowstone, or the dull noise of an ember as it broke apart, and now and then the distant wail of some wild animal. I soon joined the rest in the land of dreams.

The first appraisal I had of the approach of day, were the loud cries: "Leve! leve! leve!"* uttered by numerous voices.

Starting up, I saw the *voyageurs* all astir, making ready to embark. The boats were launched, and, being too early for breakfast, the men sprung in and seized the oars.

"We halt for breakfast," said the steersman, "at the Indian village, which I understand is your destination."

With the same inspiring song of previous days, the men bent to their oars, and the boats shot rapidly through the floating water. In the course of an hour or more, the brigade put in for breakfast, and the same bustling scene that had taken place the night before was re-enacted.

The place chosen was a broad, open plot of grass, reaching down to the water's edge and extending some hundred feet back, to the edge of the forest. No signs of Indians were seen, and I was somewhat puzzled to know how it was known they were in the vicinity. The clerk explained to me that Bidlon had described the halting spot and the distance so accurately, that there could be no mistake, and the savages would soon make their appearance.

We had scarcely spoken, when a movement was heard in the forest, and several Indians made their appearance. They seemed to understand the meaning of the trading; for, shortly behind them came numbers of others bearing loads of peltries—the furs of beavers, foxes, badgers, lynxes, martens, otters, and wolverines. A barter at once commenced, and in less than half an hour the whole array was deposited in the boats, and the Indians were proudly parading in the gaudy trinkets and dresses which had just fallen to their lot.

"Where is their village?" I asked of Bidlon.

"A mile or so back in the woods; you can't miss it."

"I can remain here without danger, can I not?"

* *Arise, or get up.*

"Yas, I guess so—hold on, I'll fix it for you."

With this he strode rapidly toward a man who appeared to be the chief, and commenced a conversation. He understood the Sioux tongue well enough to hold quite an intelligible conversation. The talk lasted but a moment, when he returned.

"You needn't be skeerish," said he; "I've made it all right. I told that old chap you wanted to take a look at the country hereabouts, to skeer up some furs for us ag'in. He was a little suspicious at first, shoot me ef he warn't! and he axed ef you wanted to run off with that gal o' theirs, 'cause ef you war', you'd better leave yer ha'r behind you. There's been two or three round these parts after her, and he won't stand it no longer. You've got to be mighty shy, Jarsey, I kin tell yer; but I hope you'd get her for all that, ogh!"

"I am grateful to you for this kindness, Biddon—"

"Never mind 'bout that; come to the p'int ef you've got any thing to say."

"I had nothing except to express my thanks, which you seem averse to receiving."

"It does go ag'in my stummick, I allow, Jarsey; when you come the squaw over me, I can't stand it. Yer's as likes to talk furr and squar and leave the rest. Shoot me ef I doesn't!"

"I suppose the time has come for us to separate, then, Biddon?"

"Leastways it's close at hand. Think you'd better go up to Se'kak's settlement with us; don't s'pose you will; think you're a fool, shoot me ef I don't, ogh!"

"It seems our separation is to be something like it was before," I laughed. "I believe you had a small opinion of my abilities at that time."

"Well, yer's as hopes you'll come out right side up this time. In course I'll have a glimpse of that ugly face of your'n ag'in. In course."

"I don't know about that. As you have gone into the service of the Hudson Bay Company, your sphere of action will be far removed from mine, and it will be an occurrence which I can not expect at this time that will bring us together again."

"That ain't so sartin," said the trapper, in a low, confidential tone. "I rather opine I'll be down in Independence this fall, and ef those fellows ever comes on keepin' me around, they've got to stop round themselves. Shoot me ef they hain't, ogh!"

"I hope you will not spend your life in the dreary region hereabouts, for it will indeed be a dreary, lonely life for you."

"Well, you see, Jarsey," he continued, with a shade of feeling, "it don't make much difference whar I traps. Yer's as s'pects to go a-huntin' some war' in the mountains, and leave my top knot for the buzzards and reds, and it might as well be in one part as t'other of this country."

"Fudge, Biddon, don't talk that way. Why, I am sure I

shall see you settled down in the States, with a wife and a dozen children--"

I paused as I noticed the trapper's face. Some strange emotion was gaining the mastery over him; but he conquered it in a minute.

"Never talk that way ag'in, Jarsey; I can't stand it."

"Parlon me; you will soon be under way," I spoke, wishing to pass from the allusion which had been so painful to him. He turned, and looking at the brigade, which was making preparations to start, answered:

"Yas; the boys are near ready, and they won't wait. What yer goin' to do, Jarsey, when we leave you among the rocks?"

"I have told you, Biddon, that my sole purpose is to seek out Nat Todd. I have given you an account of my meeting and partial flight with Imogene, the captive, who has told me of his whereabouts. She is now waiting at Death Rock for me, and is as confident as I am that I shall bring Nat with her. These Indians, believing Imogene to be with the other tribe, will not expect her flight unless a runner arrives here and acquaints them with it; but I have little fear of that, as I have no expectation of remaining any length of time."

"Wal, as that little gal has seed Nat, of course he's kickin'. Bless her soul! I'd like to see her sweet face, but I s'pose the brigade can't spare me just now. Jarsey, I've my suspicions that that other spirit is somewhere out toward Oregon, among a tribe of re-bskins. I've had my suspicions I say, but I'll say nothin' more now 'cept to kind of hint I may take a tramp out in them parts some day to see ef thar' be signs of her."

"I sincerely hope that such may be the case, although I can not be as sanguine you are. Should you rescue her, the debt of gratitude--"

"There! that'll do, ogh!" interrupted Biddon, imperatively. "Such things go ag'in my stomach, and I don't want to hear 'em. As you're on the track of Nat, go, for he may be somewhere 'yt, in spite of the fears I have that he isn't, arter all."

"Rest assure I shall leave no stone unturned. I shall seek him at once."

"And when you finds him, tell him old Bill Biddon is a-come, and ready to hunt savages with him any time, ef he don't get behind me when shootin' time comes. Ough! ough!" and the trapper enjoyed his joke merrily. He stopped suddenly and looked at the brigade.

"Wal, Jarsey, talkin' time's gittin' mighty short. I'd like to talk longer, but can't do it this time. Hope we'll have a time down in the States 'fore long."

"I sincerely trust we shall," I answered, unwilling to turn the hopeful picture which he was drawing for himself.

"And we'll have Nat 'long with us," he added.

"Of course, for I am sure he would not willingly miss an

opportunity of seeing his old friend again. "Of course, Bidlon, we shall meet, if not in this world, I hope in the next."

"Perhaps so, though I can't tell till we get there. Don't show much heart then matters, eh?"

At this moment the voice of the steersman was heard, ordering the men to their places. Bidlon turned, took a step, then halted and faced me.

"Good-by, Jarsey."

He extended his hand, but ere I could take it it was hastily withdrawn. He mumbled something, dashed his hand across his eyes, and strode rapidly toward the boat.

"Good-by, Bidlon. God bless you!" I called after him.

The voyageurs seized their oars, and in a few moments they were in the stream, their same cheery song echoing as loudly and as heartily as before. I stood upon the bank, watching them as they carried their load onward. In a few moments they rounded a knoll in the river—Bidlon made a signal to me, and the next minute they had vanished.

As the song of the voyageurs grew fainter and fainter, until it died away in the distance, I awoke from the morbid reverie into which I had fallen, and turned to the work before me. There was a dozen Indians around, all busy with their new possessions. Some were parading pompously in their new blankets, some examining their glitters knives, and others wrenching off great mouthfuls from large twists of tobacco, and all evidently in the highest spirits. The chief had been presented with a long, pointed knife, and he was standing apart, trying its edge, and "drawing blood" on different objects in the distance.

I stood still, he approached, and I then approached and spoke to him. They remained; I saw at once it was not common. I had thought there was not probably a savage who could speak a word of English in the tribe. However, as they spoke to me, I began to see the truth in which I spent my captivity, my situation was not as bad as it might have been.

When I saw that the chief started toward his village, I followed him, and he turned back, and I myself at his side. He was now thrown over his shoulder, and he seemed to have lost all interest in it as he walked forward, his dark eyes fixed on the ground. A few minutes' walk brought us to the first village in the Blackfoot country. It was so similar to the one I had just left, that it needs no mention here.

The Blackfoot seem to be one of the many divisions of the Dacotahs. Some authorities mention the name of the Dacotahs as being the name of the nation of Nebraska. These are all the same people, and are the same people who are known as the Blackfoot. They are a people of the same kind, and are the same people who are known as the Blackfoot. Like all North American Indians, their life is a migratory one; and the traveler who to-day finds

them located on the Yellowstone or little Missouri, may, a year after, find them as far westward as the Great Falls of the Missouri.

My advent among these savages excited no unusual attention, as they are often visited by traders and hunters. The chief took me to his own lodge, where all the attention I could wish was given. I was gladly surprised to find upon the next day, that there was a half-breed among them who could speak the English tongue. His acquaintance I soon made. He was a middle-aged man, who had spent most of his life in trapping, sometimes as far northward as the Saskatchewan, and who often acted as interpreter for his tribe. He possessed the daring hardihood of the French trapper, and the low, ferocious cunning of the savage. He had ever considered this tribe as his people, having a squaw and several children.

From this half-breed I learned that the flight of Imogene was not yet discovered, and that the tribe which held Nat was about a dozen miles to the eastward. I informed the chief, through the interpreter, that I should make several days' ramble through the woods, in order to get a better idea of the face of the country and of its resources. He seemed to believe I really was an agent of one of the fur companies, and offered me an escort. I declined, however, and the next morning started on foot in the direction of the tribe alluded to.

CHAPTER XII.

FOUND AT LAST.

I took a direction nearly due east toward the Black Hills. Near the middle of the day I reached the shore of a lake. It was a small, beautiful sheet of water, its glistening surface unruffled by a single ripple, and I stood a long time gazing upon its placid bosom. The blue outline of the opposite shore was faintly visible in the distance, and here and there the green face of a tiny island protruded from its surface, adding greatly to the picturesqueness of the scene.

As I stood looking dreamily out upon this lake, my eyes rested upon a small speck, just discernible far toward the other end. It was too small and dark to be an island, and, furthermore, I fancied it was moving. A moment more satisfied me that it was a canoe crossing the lake nearly to the point upon which I was standing. So small and black was it, that for a long time I was tempted to believe it was nothing but a bird floating upon the surface; but the flashing of the oars in the

sunshine showed its true nature, and I awaited anxiously its approach.

On it came, slowly and steadily, its form gradually increasing as it approached, until I could discover the outlines of a single man propelling it over the water. It struck me as a little singular that the Indian, solitary and alone, should approach so unhesitatingly a stranger, and I was upon the point of concealing myself; but, knowing that I must have been seen, and that even a proceeding would only awaken suspicion, I remained boldly in view.

A few minutes later and the canoe grated upon the sand a few yards from me; and, doused in all the glittering paraphernalia of savage war-paint and plumes, no less a personage than Nathan Tall stopped ashore and approached me!

I was upon the point of calling out to him, when I saw he did not recognize me. Since we had last been together my beard had grown considerably, and my dress was also changed to that of a semi-barbarian. I drew my hat down to my eyes and spoke in a changed voice.

"A pleasant day this, my friend."

"Yes it is," replied the same natural, cracked voice.

"A fine country this, too."

"Yes, that's so; didn't expect to see you."

"And why not, my friend?"

"Cause 'tain't often you see a white man in these parts; you're the first one I've seen."

"And how is it you are here yourself?"

"Wal stranger, there's a long story fastened to that question—a longer one than I care about spinning at present."

"You are not a prisoner, I hope?"

"It was some time last fall I got tak, and I've been with them, of course, ever since."

"And why have you remained with them so long? It strikes me that if I had the fine opportunity you have, I should not be long waiting to bid them farewell."

"You see, when I landed down here, it was winter, and if you're any hunter, as I calculate you are, from your dress, you must know that a fellow from the States would make poor work tramping a thousand miles at such a time. So I concluded to wait 'til spring, and have been thinking about going for the last month or two, but, see how or other I haven't got started; I suppose 'cause I haven't had a good start."

"What were you doing on the lake?"

"I came down this morning to fish, and seeing you on t'other side, I paddled across."

"You are then allowed considerable liberty, it seems."

"Well, I have considerable, though it hain't done me much good so far."

"You wish to return to the States, I presume."

"I guess I do; I am about as long as a dog as you ever laid eyes on, and there's a gal home that I want to see amazingly."

At this remark I was compelled to cough several times, to prevent bursting into a loud, boisterous laugh. I felt like dropping upon the grass and rolling over and over, and yelling like an Indian. But I restrained myself, and determined to carry the deception further.

"The most likely has given you up as dead by this time."

"I'm a little afraid she has, and that's the reason I want to go down and tell her her mistake. But I don't know as it would be any use, by gracious!" he added, in a desponding tone.

"And why not, pray?"

"Oh, there's a chap named Bill Hawkins, who thinks he's mighty smart, all the time flourishing round there. I'd just like to lay hands on him once," and Nat clinched his hands and shook his head menacingly. Then resuming his natural manner, he added, quickly, and with a sort of desperation, "I don't care, though. If Sal wants him, she can have him."

"That's it. Take things philosophically is my motto, when you are compelled to."

In making this last remark, I unwittingly dropped my voice to its natural key. Nat started and raised those large, blue, innocent eyes of his, and stared wonderingly at me.

"Did my remark surprise you?" I asked, working harder than I ever did to maintain my gravity.

"It weren't what you said, but your voice sounded awfully like a person I used to know, and I thought you might be him."

"Perhaps I am."

"No; you don't look like him. He was about your size, but didn't dress like you, nor didn't have such whiskers."

"What was his name?"

"William Richmond, from New Jersey."

"William Richmond, from New Jersey," I repeated, as though trying to recall some half-forgotten reminiscence.

"He used to be called 'Jasey' by Ben Burton," added Nat, quickly, yet to aid my recollection.

"And do you know Bill Burton, a trapper?" I demanded.

"I am of the opinion that I do, being as I have hunted with him a long time."

"And where? He been old friend of mine. I saw him some time ago, and he was then in the service of the Hudson Bay Company."

"Did he say anything about 'Jasey'?"

"I wouldn't mind. That's where I heard the name. Yes, he said a good deal about him, and he also mentioned a person called Nathan Tuck, I think."

"I am the man, sir," responded Nat, with dignity.

"You are! I recall now that he mentioned the fact of your

captivity, although he was more inclined to say you were dead and gone long since."

"But is a pretty 'cute chap, but he's mistaken there."

"Yes; he seemed to cherish a warm friendship for you."

"You see the way of it was this: Me and Bill Richmond started from the States last summer for California. The company we was with ran away from us, taking my kindred name with them. So we started for California on our own hook. We crossed the Isthmus and changed our minds, or, rather, Richmond did, and we concluded to go on a hunt up in these parts. Well, we did, and this is the end of that hunt. We landed on a place down on the Yellowstone, and would I have spent a good time if it hadn't been for that Richmond. He was a good fellow, but betwixt you and me (you needn't say nothing about it, you know), he was rather soft, and I had to keep a close watch over him to prevent his getting into danger. There was a bunch of some Indians down the stream in a canoe, and they was pretty crazy. It wasn't the Indians, though, but a white fellow named Sage was pretty, I allow, but he ought to have been a better man to chase 'em as he did; he might have been a good deal better. We used to go down and watch this canoe. One day I went a little lower down the stream than he did, and hid in some bushes to see the water to see a good look at the red and the Indians. Pretty soon they came and as they got along by me, by grace as if they didn't see me, I went into the bushes all right. I was so fast in the roots and bushes that I hadn't time to get out before they got right over me. I then up and I laid away to keep them off, but I failed to make any, and didn't hit them, and the first thing I knowed I hadn't know any thing. One of them smashed his head against my arm, and he hit me by the neck, whipped me down the river, pulled to the other side, and made me walk all the way home. I haven't seen Richmond or his son since, and I don't know what has become of them."

"Richmond is safe, of course; and Richmond was a captive, I suppose, at one time, but he managed to make his escape some time ago."

"But do you know that woman, I should like to know?"

"Simply for the reason that I am William Richmond."

Richmond as it were, by a thunderbolt. His eyes and mouth opened, his face had turned to his feet, and he stared at me. His face was such an odd mixture of wonder, doubt, and curiosity and pleasure, that I gave way completely to my feelings, and, leaning myself upon the ground, rolled over and laughed one of those laughs which rack our whole being, and make us as weak as an infant. When I again resumed my position, my friend approached and extended his hand.

"What you laughing at? I knowed it was you all the time."

It is hardly worth time to dwell upon the words which passed between Nat and myself after my identity became known to him. Of course he was half frantic with joy, in turn, and overwhelmed me with questions and explanations, and in the course of half an hour we came to a full understanding.

I had acquainted Nat with my separation from Imogene, and that she was waiting for me at "Death Rock." He knew the place well, and without losing time we hastened forward. He had become acquainted with Imogene, and had often conversed with her about her lost sister, and of me, little dreaming that she had ever seen me.

Nat proved his knowledge of the country, for his course toward the Death Rock was direct, and, ere we had traveled many miles, it loomed up to view. It seemed a long while to reach it, but before dark we were both conversing with Imogene.

The night was spent within its natural cave, Nat and I conversing around the fire, while Imogene, wrapped in our blankets, slumbered unconsciously beside it. Nat succeeded in catching several fine trout from a small mountain-stream, and when we resumed our journey, I hardly think three more hopeful people could have been found in the universe.

Our progress was less rapid than usual, as we feared for Imogene, although her life had been such as to make her the very embodiment of health and activity. At night we reached a bend of the Yellowstone, and camped upon its banks. A fire was again kindled, and while Nat kept watch, I concluded to take a little rest. He allowed me to sleep heavily until morning, when I was aroused by one of the most terrible, unearthly shrieks that ever greeted mortal ear.

"God of heaven! what does that mean?" I exclaimed, springing to my feet.

"Sounds like the 'Snorter,' the engine that I heard on the Boston road," answered Nat, rubbing his eyes, and listening.

"Hush!" I admonished, as again that hideous scream burst upon us.

"Wonder if the Pacific Railroad's built yet?" remarked Nat, with the almost *nonchalant* ease; "or, maybe, some of their engines have run away from them."

As I stood wondering and waiting, the gray light of morning commenced appearing through the forest, and shortly the day dawned. A moment after, as I was about to awaken Imogene, the awful scream was repeated, seemingly directly across the river. It was different from a human voice, but sounded like the cry of a wild animal in extremity of the direst agony.

As if our terror was still too faint, we now heard the loud roar of a bell, apparently from the very forest.

"What is that?" asked Imogene, pale with horror.

"Heaven knows!" I answered.

"Sounds like the old bell up in Lubec," remarked Nat, who, singularly enough, was the least agitated.

"Listen!" whispered Imogene, raising her hand.

Now was heard a dead sound like the distant heave of the stormy sea, growing stronger and nearer each second, and at intervals that wild, unearthly shriek reverberated through the forest-arches with a horrid power.

Moments were now assuming such an inexplicable form I began to fear I was losing my senses. I looked around upon the faces of others; but no—it was all a terrible reality.

"Look!" spoke Imogene, in a husky whisper, pointing down the river.

I did look, and what was seen? There, just rounding the curve of the Yellowstone below us, burst the broad, flaming hull of a steamboat.

For a moment I could scarce believe my senses. Nat was the first to recover himself.

"I knowed what it was all the time, by gracious! Hulloa, you!"

The latter exclamation was addressed in vociferous tones to the steamboat; and, fearing lest he might still escape notice, he sprang into the water and waved his pennons excitedly over his head, yelling at the top of his voice all the time. We had been seen, however, and heeded by those on the boat. A small bell tinkled, and instantly the huge wheel of the steamer reversed, throwing the water into foamy waves, and quickly bringing it to a stand still. The captain then stepped from his wheelhouse and hailed us.

"What's wanted?"

"Supper and lodging," answered Nat.

"Who are you?"

"White men, of course."

"White men; I see only one, and you're an Injin, sure as I am Captain Garbold!"

I now stepped forward from the shelter of the forest, to which I had instinctively retired with the trembling Imogene, upon the appearance of the boat.

"Ah! who are those?" called the captain, instantly.

"We are whites, as you can readily see, and only ask to be taken to our friends."

The captain immediately turned and I spoke to several beetle-browed Indians. A few minutes afterward a small boat put out from the steamer, and Imogene, followed by myself, stepped into the launch, but Nat lingered.

"Come, hurry, Nat, don't keep them waiting," said I.

"I'm going to see 'em!" he remarked, quietly.

"What do you mean?" I asked, in astonishment.

He approached, and whispered in my ear:

"I'm going to hunt up Irene Marmont!"

"Why——"

"Don't say any more," he interrupted, with a smile. "I will do it. There is no use of trying to persuade me to go with you. My mind is made up, and has been made up a long time."

Imogene joined her entreaties with mine, but he could not be moved to change his resolution. Not wishing to offend our friends, I extended my hand.

"If you are determined to remain, I must now bid you good-bye," said I. "Your determination is so new to me that I can but only wish it. It is a hopeless search upon which you are going. I trust. May the One who has so mercifully watched over me of old, still protect you. If you ever see Billon, don't forget me to him. Good-by."

"Not me either," said Imogene, taking his hand. "I long to see him, to pour out my heart's gratitude to him. I hope we shall see you again."

"Oh! you will, sure. I shall be down in the States one of these days, and like enough I may bring a wife with me, and several little Nat Tolls, as good looking as your heirs will be. You may not think this is a hot fireweed, for I know it isn't."

We exchanged farewells once more, and then were rowed out to the steamer. As we were received on board, Nat swung his plume over his head, and shouted:

"Long life to you! the first news you receive from Nat Toll will be a dispatch from the Rocky Mountains, 'that he is making a sensation in that neighbor hood!'"

Another and a last farewell, and the eccentric being had vanished in the forest.

Imogene had no suspicion of the true cause of Nat Toll's erratic course, and I judged it best to let her remain in ignorance until Nat should inform her himself. Whether that time was ever to come or not, no one could tell; but I had strong hope that it would.

As may be supposed, our advent created an infinite amount of questioning and wonderment for our new-found friends. The boat was the steamer "Shooting Star," which had been sent to trace the Yellowstone, as far as it was navigable, by a company in St. Louis. They proposed opening trade in this section, and knowing well the prodigious resources of the country watered by its tributaries, had sent a skilled engineer and crew to ascertain its character and availability. This river had, however, been ascended before.

The "Shooting Star" ascended the Yellowstone several hundred miles farther, until brought to a standstill by the rapids in its upper part. Several days were spent in running up Clark's Fork, the Big Horn, Tongue, Powder, and a number of other streams, many of which, as yet, have received no names, though of considerable size. All along the banks of these

gathered crowds of wondering Indians, who surveyed us with mingled terror and amazement. On two occasions, when halting to wood, the crew were attacked by them, and one of their number was slain. At other points they manifested a friendly disposition and behaved extensively with us.

Finally the bow of the boat was turned home, and on a fine morning, in the latter part of June, 1850, we glided into the tranquil waters of the great Missouri, and a few days later the "Star" rode at the wharves in St. Louis. Accompanied by Laurence I made my way home as rapidly as possible. As may be supposed, my return was a never-to-be-forgotten day to my friends. The canoe in which I had joined a detachment, had been attacked, a few days subsequent to my departure from it, by an overwhelming body of Apache Indians. Rumors reached the States that all had fallen in the attack, and my reappearance was like the dead returning to life.

The reader, I trust, can imagine the few remaining incidents. After inducing Laurence to return to the States, I do not think I should have ever forgiven myself had I not endeavored for all the protection within my power. She was like an angel at first, taken from a distant clime; but love works wonders. Today there are few accomplishments of her sex which she does not possess. I had gained no princess or wealthy heroine, but simply a wife, in the truest sense of the word.

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